A WHITE CIRCLE POCKET NOVEL

HORSESHOE LUCK

W. C. TUTTLE

A Wild West Yarn



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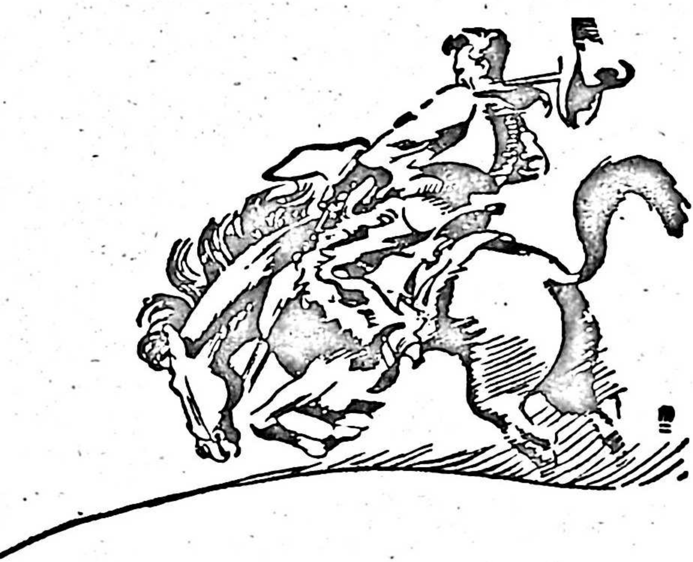
Adventure in the West!

W. C. TUTTLE is one of the most popular living writers of Western stories. His characters are the authentic types of the Western prairies, and even the bad men among them are redeemed by an appealing touch of humour, so that a Tuttle story is as entertaining as it is exciting. The present volume contains two rattling good yarns featuring Sad Sontag and Swede Harrigan, Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens—characters that are known to thousands of W. C. Tuttle readers.



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CHAPTER I

THEY came out of the south, those muffled figures, riding in a drifting rain. The wind and rain muffled the splash of their horses' hoofs. An occasional lightning flash showed that these men wore huge Mexican sombreros, rubber ponchos. The road was ankle deep in yellow mud, which retarded the speed of the riders.

They came to a barbed-wire fence, which they followed along the road, at a corner they left the road and followed the fence. Wet brush rasped against their leather clothing, as the horses slithered along in the mud. To their left flickered the light from a window, illuminating the pouring rain.

One of the men leaned out from his saddle, cautiously holding out his hand to find the tall post of the gate. It happened to be open; so they rode in, facing the wind, which howled around the old ranch-house. They dismounted, flinging back their rubber ponchos, disclosing the fact that three of the four men were armed with rifles.

There were only two men in the house, seated in front of a roaring fire in a fireplace. One was a huge man, roughly dressed, his smooth shaven face deeply lined, his hair as white as the fur on a winter showshoe rabbit. The other was also an old man, grizzled, bronzed; a tough old range dweller, with misshapen legs; limping badly when he got up to put more wood on the fire.

"I wish Mary would come back," sighed the white-haired man.

"Henry, you quit worryin' about Mary," said the

thin one. "She's plumb safe at the Clevis's, I tell yuh. Ain't no sense in her a-comin' home in this here rain."

"I know, Hickory; but I wish she was home."

"There yuh go!" snorted the crippled one. "Worry all the time. What'd yuh have to worry about in the horspital? Seven months flat on yore back. I should think you'd be so glad to be upright and goin' under yore own steam that you'd forgit to worry."

"There was plenty to worry me, Hickory."

"Not as much as there would have been if I'd have told yuh what Bud Blain done."

Henry Ames' face clouded quickly.

"That's right, Hickory. If I didn't know it was true, no man on earth could ever have made me believe Bud would do that. Oh, I know Bud was wild. Marriage set on him like a saddle on a wild bronc. He wanted to buck it off, but was too—well, like I said, he shot square. That's why I'd have bet on him.

"But to sell the Three Slash ranch for cash, fade out of the country and never leave a dollar for his daughter—Hickory, if he'd have killed a man, I'd back him with every dollar I've got. But to do this to Mary—and me."

Henry Ames got to his feet and walked slowly over to a curtained window. Hickory Flynn leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands around one knee.

"Humans are jist like racehorses, Henry," he said. "They never run true to form."

"True," agreed Ames, staring out into the darkness. "I—why, there's somebody——"

But Henry Ames never knew who it was, because at that moment a bullet smashed the glass, almost against his chest, and from out in the storm came

the thudding report of a rifle. Ames crumpled up, tearing down the curtain as he fell.

Old Hickory Flynn sprang to his feet, stumbling towards a table, where he had left his holstered gun and cartridge belt. His groping old hand was three feet short of the scarred butt of that old Colt gun when a rifle barrel slashed through the window pane. The heavy bullet knocked the old cowboy flat on his face, his right hand still clutching.

Glass tingled from the opposite window, as a rifle poked in. There were two more shots fired at the huddled shapes on the floor. Then the rifle barrel was lifted, and the third shot smashed the lamp, leaving the house in darkness except for the light from the fireplace. A few moments later four muffled riders were splashing back over the muddy road.

Before Dick Penner became secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, he had been a cow waddie —and a good one. He knew all the ins and outs of the ranges, knew cattle and horses, and knew something of men. Small, slightly grey, honest-eyed, he sat on his desk and looked at Mary Blain, who was seated across the desk from him.

Mary was just past eighteen, a slim slip of a girl, dark of hair, with nice features and beautiful eyes. Just now they were wet, and her lips trembled a little, as she made a pretence of smoothing her skirt.

"I—I guess that is all of the story, Mr. Penner," she said.

Dick Penner glanced towards a partly opened door at his left, but turned quickly back to the girl.

"I'm sure sorry, Miss Blain," he said. "I knowed yore grandpa and Old Hickory a long time. It jist don't seem possible. What has the sheriff done about it?"

"Asked questions," sighed Mary.

"Uh—huh," nodded Penner. "Of course, if Mexicans done it—and it looks like one of their raids—there ain't much that can be done about it. The sheriff findin' that Mexican sombrero down by the gate makes it look thataway. You say it was awful windy and rainin' that night?"

"Terrible. I was at Mr. Clevis's house all night, because I didn't want to come home in that awful storm."

"Uh—huh. Plenty reasons for one of 'em losin' that hat. You say yore grandpa only got back a couple, three days before it happened?"

"Yes. He was back in Rochester in a hospital several months."

"He was back there when your father sold the Three Slash?"

Mary choked, but nodded. After a few moments she said:

"Grandad didn't know daddy was selling out. Daddy told me he was tired of the cattle country. He—he said we'd go away and live like regular people. Mr. Orval, the man who bought our ranch, gave daddy five thousand in cash to pay off the mortgage to the bank. I saw the money. Mr. Orval didn't want any mortgage on the place."

"The mortgage was all paid off, eh?"

"Oh, yes."

"Was you at home when the deal was settled?"

"No, I wasn't there. They said the title had to be all cleared up and it might take several days. Josie Clevis wanted me to go to Tucson with her, and daddy let me go. We were gone nearly three days, and when we got back——"

"I see," nodded Penner sympathetically. "And you haven't heard a word from him. Miss Blain, have you ever quarrelled with yore dad?"

Mary looked at him queerly for several moments.

"We never had a real quarrel, Mr. Penner. Daddy was never affectionate. You see, my mother died seven years ago. She loved my father, but—but I don't believe he loved her. He wanted to be free to do as he pleased. He didn't care for children; so I never got any affection from him. I—I guess I was merely an unpleasant—well, sort of a duty."

Mary got to her feet. Penner stood up and walked around his desk to her.

"I'm awful sorry about everythin'," he said, as they shook hands. "I'll do what I can. It may not be much, but——"

"Thank you, Mr. Penner."

He closed the door and came back to his desk. From the partly opened door protruded a long, lean face, with a long lock of roan-coloured hair hanging down nearly over one eye. The rest of the man came into view; a long, raw-boned cowboy, wearing store clothes. On his feet were high-heeled boots and on the back of his head was a huge Stetson hat.

"Gone?" he drawled, looking quizzically at Penner.

"Yuh don't see her, do yuh?" asked Penner.

"You wouldn't play a joke on a feller, would yuh, Dick?"

"Sad Sontag, if you don't set down, I'll knock yuh down."

Sad Sontag looked around the little office and shook his head.

"It couldn't be done in here."

"Why couldn't it?" queried the secretary, whose head barely reached Sad's shoulder.

"'Cause there ain't room in here for me and the dozen big men you'd have to bring in to do the job."

Sad grinned at the little man, sat down gingerly in the chair that Mary Blain had occupied, and looked at Penner.

"Well?" queried Penner. "You heard her story, Sad."

"Uh-huh."

"What do yuh think?"

"I think it was a hell of a thing to happen to a girl."

"I didn't mean that part of it."

Sad reached in his pocket and drew out a limp sack of Durham and some loose cigarette-papers. Penner watched Sad's powerful fingers fashion a cigarette. His hands were long, bony, graceful, in spite of their size and shape. He watched Sad's thin lips draw in the smoke, and shifted his gaze to the level eyes of the tall cowboy. Sad was looking intently at him.

"Why didja want me to set in there and listen in on her tale?" asked Sad. "Was she so pretty yuh didn't dare let me look at her?"

"She's pretty enough," admitted Penner. "And what a tough deal she's had."

Penner picked up a pencil and drew meaningless figures on his desk pad, his brow furrowed in thought. Finally he lifted his head and looked at Sad.

"I don't know what can be done about it," he said slowly. "Old Henry Ames has been a member of this layout for years, and never asked us for any help. He was a fine man, Sad. They never made a better one."

Sad nodded slowly. "But that don't answer my question."

"I had heard some of the story," replied Penner, apparently ignoring Sad's gentle reminder. "I wanted you to listen in on it, unseen by her, because I want to hire you and Swede to go down there and —and see what you can see."

Sad opened his mouth wide, closed it slowly and shifted his position.

"Dickie Penner," he said severely, "I'm—me and Swede are lookin' for a new range. I told yuh that, and you said mebbe yuh could point us out to a job punchin' somebody's cows. We ain't detectives. I dunno why yuh ever——"

"Set down there!" snapped Penner. "You try to throw me down and I'll pistol-whip yuh, Sad Sontag. Dang yore long-geared soul, yo're better than all the detectives in the state. Right now you and Swede Harrigan are under salary—if yuh only know it."

Sad looked at the half-smoked cigarette between his thumb and finger, a half-smile on his lean face.

"I—I'd hate to do much about it, until I talk with Swede."

"Talk with Swede! Why, that grin-faced Mick would foller you through hell and never mention the heat. If you tell him yo're hired, he'll never even ask what salary yo're gettin'. Don't ever forget that I *know* Swede Harrigan."

"Swede's a pretty good feller," admitted Sad. "All I have to do is tell him there's a pretty girl in the deal."

"Strong for beauty, eh?"

Sad chuckled softly. "Not necessarily. Tall, short, lean or fat; anythin' from seven to seventy. They all look alike to Swede. He likes old ladies. Says he can kiss one without feelin' that he's gettin' somethin' for nothin'. Oh, I reckon Swede admires pretty girls, but he's scared to death of 'em."

Penner laughed heartily.

"He's a great feller. Why, he thinks you couldn't get along without him."

Sad's eyes sobered quickly, and his big hands smoothed the brim of his sombrero.

"I don't reckon I could, Dick," he replied softly. "Anyway, I wouldn't want to. Well," Sad got slowly to his feet, "I reckon I better go find him and tell him he's drawin' pay."

"Will yuh be back up here again, Sad?"

"What for, Dick?"

"Oh, I just—well, we might discuss things, yuh see."

"It's jist a waste of time, talkin' to you. I'll see yuh some time—I hope. Keep the soup off yore chin, feller." And Sad closed the door softly and went down the hallway.

CHAPTER II

WHATEVER might be said about Bud Blain, he had built the Three Slash into a paying cattle outfit. It was understood that Jim Orval had paid thirty thousand in cash for the outfit, which was considered a bargain price.

Orval was forty-five years of age, good-looking in a heavy way, but inclined to be domineering, stubborn and argumentative. He seemed to know cattle. Before completing the deal, but when it seemed assured, he brought in his own crew of three men, Ed Felts, Jack Daley, and another cowboy known as "Ocoteo." The men who had worked for Bud Blain soon drifted away. Orval also hired a new cook, a Chinaman, who probably had nothing to show his right to be north of the border—but no one questioned his right to be a cook at the Three Slash.

Mary Blain had never met Jim Orval. On this day she was at the Sharps City Bank, talking over her affairs with Tom Addington, the kindly old banker who had been her grandfather's personal friend. As they came from the banker's little private office, Jim Orval came into the bank, and the banker introduced them.

"Miss Blain I am mighty pleased to meet you," said Orval. "It seems strange that we haven't met before; this is such a small place."

"I suppose it just happened that way," smiled Mary.

"Better late than never," smiled Orval. He watched her walk from the bank, before turning back to the banker.

"She's mighty pretty," he observed.

"She is," agreed the banker. "Mary Blain is a very fine girl. I can't imagine Bud Blain leaving her in the lurch."

"No," replied Orval soberly. "But you never can tell, Addington. She'll get the Circle A, won't she?"

"I wish she would."

"Meanin' that she won't?"

"Henry Ames had two children," said the banker. "The daughter married Bud Blain, the son went away. That was long before they came to this valley. Henry Ames told me some of the story. I don't believe he has heard from Frank, the son, for seven or eight years. If he is alive, he will naturally inherit the Circle A, because Henry Ames left no will."

"Did you know this Frank Ames?" asked Orval.

"No, he never was here. He would be about forty years of age, I believe. As Henry told it to me, Frank left home shortly after June, the daughter married Bud Blain. That was somewhere in Nevada, I believe. Except for this Frank Ames, Mary is the legal heir to the Circle A. But it may be a long time before he is found, or proof produced that he is no longer alive."

"Makes it tough for her," said Orval thoughtfully. "Addington, I don't want to be personal, but how is she fixed for money?"

"She will take charge of the ranch," said the banker rather stiffly. "The bank will give her all necessary assistance, until matters are cleared up."

"Well, that's fine. I merely thought that—well damn it, Addington, we've got to help each other."

"I appreciate your offer, Orval—and I know she would."

Down in the little cubby-hole office on the main

street, "Tiny" Totten, deputy sheriff, mourned musically to the discords of his misplayed guitar. Tiny had seen Mary Blain drive down the street, and the sight of Mary Blain always gave Tiny a period of deep and mournful melancholy. Plunking out his last discord, he carefully hung the guitar on a nail, rolled a cigarette, lighted it and stepped sideways through the doorway to the sidewalk to squint up and down the dusty main street of Sharps City.

It was not absolutely necessary for Tiny to step out sideways—he *could* have scraped both sides of the doorway. But Tiny Totten was five feet eleven inches tall, and his girth was practically the same as his height. He weighed, with a slight daily fluctuation, two hundred and seventy pounds.

The sheriff's office was at Mesa City, twenty-five miles away, but the sheriff found it very handy to have Tiny at Sharps City, where Tiny would know all about shipment of cattle, check on all brands, and save the sheriff many miles of unnecessary travelling.

As a matter of fact, Alexander Shipman, the sheriff, was lazy. It made a fine combination; a lazy sheriff and a fat deputy. Alexander had at some time seen a Western stage production, in which there was the conventional Western sheriff. And Alexander had copied his sonorous voice, phrases and certain gestures to perfection. The sheriff was a half-pint in size beside his deputy, who had a high-pitched tenor voice; and the sheriff's voice was a booming basso.

But there was no lack of nerve with these two; nerve and ability. Arizona does not choose their peace officers on their shapes nor voices.

Tiny Totten was in love with Mary Blain. There was not a single doubt in his mind about that. But Tiny had never made love to her—except in his

day-dreaming, in which he was a dashing, slender young fellow. It was all very nice, until his dreams were over and he visualized the exact notch on the hay scales across the street which showed his weight.

"Dang the luck," he sighed to himself, "I dunno exactly what I do look like, 'cause they don't make mirrors big enough."

But the crowning insult, from Tiny's point of view, was the fact that he had to wear suspenders. There were no visible hips to support a belt. And because of that fact he carried his big Colt .45 inside the waistband of his pants, with the butt of it protruding well out from his prow, much like a small nubbin on the bole of a big tree.

Lonnie Welch was the other fly in Tiny's ointment. Lonnie was, in appearance, all that Tiny dreamed of being. Tall, slender, athletic and handsome was Lonnie, driver of the Sharps-Mesa stage. Lonnie was twenty-five, a likeable, happy-go-lucky young cowboy, who, before the tragedy at the Circle A, used to spend many an evening out there. Tiny knew that Mary Blain liked Lonnie. Everybody knew that.

After Tiny inspected the street to his own satisfaction he went across to the Trail Herd Saloon, where he rested his elbows on the bar and gazed thoughtfully at himself in the fly-specked mirror. Nelse Sorensen, the big red-faced bartender, yawned and put away the paper-backed novel he was reading.

"Business ain't so good," he said.

"Who the hell cares?" replied Tiny indifferently. "Give me some whisky and have a drink yourself, anyway."

"How you like this new man Orval?" asked Nelse, as they poured their drinks.

"Do I have to like him?" queried Tiny.

"He's a very nice feller, anyway."

Tiny choked on his drink, grew very red in the face.

"Whisky drinkin' is not like other," said Nelse. "Always don't take drink and breathe through your mouth. Like this, you take it all in your mouth, swallow right down and blow wind from your nose."

"Anyway," added Tiny wheezingly, as he threw a quarter on the bar and walked back to the doorway, where he stopped and looked up the street.

"Thirty-two years old — and somebody has to tell me how to swaller m' liquor," he said painfully.

"What you said?" asked Nelse, from back at the bar.

"Anyway," replied Tiny absently. Two cowboys were riding in on the road from Mesa, and Tiny watched them tie their horses at the saloon hitch-rack.

They were Sad Sontag and his partner, Swede Harrigan. Swede was much shorter than Sad, broad of shoulder, bowed of legs. His features stamped him unmistakably as a son of Erin, although he had never seen the land of the shamrock. Swede seemed born to laugh with and at the world.

Tiny looked upon them with a certain amount of joy. Strangers in a strange land; some one to talk with. He saw them in their saddles, watched them dismount and tie their horses. He noted their clothes, the fit and hang of their belted guns, and the stilted-legged, bent-elbow walk of men who spent their time in saddles.

"Top-hands," Tiny told himself. "They'll do to take along."

They left their horses and came towards the saloon doorway.

"Howdy, Officer," smiled Sad. The star on Tiny's bosom was sufficient identification.

"Howdy, gents," replied Tiny. "Kinda hot to-day."

"Plenty," grinned Swede, as they stepped inside. "For a hour I've been picturin' a tall scoop of cold beer. Join us?"

The invitation accepted, they drank their beer and sat down around a poker-table to roll smokes.

"Didja come in from Mesa?" asked Tiny.

Sad admitted that they had. Tiny finished rolling his cigarette, brushed the flakes of tobacco off his shirt front and looked quizzically at the two cow-boys.

"Don't neither one of you fellers happen to be named Sontag, do yuh?" he asked.

Sad looked up quickly, a puzzled expression in his eyes.

"Wait a minute," smiled Tiny. "I ain't in-quisitive. Last night the postmaster asked me if I knowed anybody in this country by that name. Said a letter come for a man named Sontag yester-day. I advised him to keep it a while and mebby Sontag will show up."

"A letter here for me?" queried Sad. "Huh! Yeah, my name's Sontag."

"Mine's Totten; knowed as Tiny."

"Shake hands with Harrigan, knowed as Swede, Totten. Folks call me Sad."

"That's the front name on that letter," grinned Tiny. "I had a idea it was Sid. Anyway, she's there for yuh."

Sad and Swede exchanged puzzled glances. This was supposed to be a secret investigation—and some one knew they were here. They finished their smokes and walked over to the post office,

where Tiny asked the postmaster for the letter. Swede watched the expression on Sad's face, as he read the letter, and decided that everything was all right. Sad did not mention the contents, until Tiny left them to go back to his office. The letter was from Dick Penner, and read:

"DEAR SAD,—I am mailing a letter to Tom Addington, the banker in Sharps City, who is an old friend of mine, a square shooter, and possibly in a position to assist you. Go and see him. You pulled out of here so fast I never had a chance to give you any expense money. Go to Addington and draw what you need. Best of luck to both of you.

"PENNER."

Swede laughed and handed the letter back to Sad.

"I reckon we better see this banker," said Sad, and Swede agreed with him.

The old banker looked over them critically, as Sad produced the letter and let him read it. He led the way back to his private office and they sat down.

"I got a letter from Penner, telling me about you," said the banker. "He explained something of what you came here for; but I can't see what good it will do."

"Neither do I," laughed Sad. "It was Dick's idea—not mine."

Addington nodded thoughtfully.

"However," he said slowly, "I shall give you all the help I can. As a matter of fact, I talked with Miss Blain to-day. You see, she is in charge of the Circle A. We are going to advise and help her along, until this inheritance is settled. At present she is

alone out there, except for an old lady, Mrs. Miner, who is taking care of the house.

"Without Dick Penner's recommendation of you two, I would not consider sending you out there to help her run the ranch. But — well, Penner must know you well in order to say what he did about you — and you look mighty capable to me. How about going out and helping the little lady run a cow ranch?"

"It might be a good move," agreed Sad. "You could merely tell her that we were sent here by a friend of yours."

"Yes, I'll do that. Stay here in town to-night, and I'll ride out with you in the morning. I have an order from Penner to let you have expense money, when you need it."

"That's fine," nodded Sad.

"I suppose you heard some of the story, Sontag."

"Well," smiled Sad, "I sat in a side room and heard Miss Blain tell Dick Penner all about it. Yeah, I reckon I know quite a lot about it."

"Good. You get a room at the hotel to-night, and in the morning we'll go out to the ranch. I wish you all the luck in the world, but I'll be hanged if I can see what's to be done."

Sad laughed and shook his head.

"It looks like a wild-goose chase, Mr. Addington. But somehow I have a feelin' that we're goin' to earn our money."

Tiny found them again later in the day and the conversation drifted around to the shooting at the Circle A ranch.

"Didn't yore office ever find any clues to who done it?" asked Sad.

"Not a danged one," replied Tiny. "There was more than one man, unless he walked around the house and shot through both windows. I picked

up the empty cartridge shells. All five was thirty-thirties.

"I don't guess there's any question about it bein' some of Pancho Torres' gang; but what can yuh do? Pancho and Ames had a run-in not long ago. Pancho claims that some of his calves drifted across the line and mixed up with the Circle A. That was his alibi for pokin' in on this range.

"He didn't take any calves back with him; and nobody ain't seen none of Torres cattle on this side of the line. Henry Ames told Torres to stay on his own side of the line, or git shot. That happened only a short time ago—right after the old man came back from the East, where he'd been in a hospital."

"What sort of a feller is Torres?" asked Sad.

"Oh, he's a big, fat Mexican geezer. Wears fancy clothes, grins all the time and talks the damnedest English yuh ever heard. He's got quite an outfit down there. Any time yuh see him, you'll see Porfiro Rodriguez and Rojaz Gurrero with him. Porfiro is the skinniest Mexican yuh ever did see, and Gurrero is about the smallest. He's almost a dwarf. Danged if I don't believe he could use an ordinary six-shooter for a walkin' cane. I've seen Torres pick him up by the belt and carry him across the street, like packin' a valise."

"Does Torres and his gang come up here?" asked Swede.

"Not openly," grinned Tiny.

"Did Henry Ames ever have trouble with anybody around here, except Torres?" asked Sad.

"No, he never did. Everybody liked the old man. Yuh see, he was away a long time, in a Eastern hospital mostly, and he was only back here a couple of days when he had trouble with Torres. Then it was only a couple of days until him and Hickory Flynn was murdered in the ranch-house.

He didn't have no enemies. Neither of 'em did, as far as that goes."

Sontag steered the conversation around to the sale of the Three Slash ranch, and found Tiny rather bitter against Bud Blain for his treatment of his daughter.

"If Henry Ames had only been here to look after things, it might have been different," said Tiny. "Bud was sour on everythin'. Wanted to sell out and go places. Well, he shore went."

"Sold out before the old man came back, eh?"

"Couple weeks. Bud Blain met Jim Orval in Tucson, and they came down here together. Orval is all right. It wasn't none of his business what Bud done about the money. It sure broke up Henry Ames, when he found what Bud had done."

"Made it tough for the girl," said Swede.

"But she'll own the Circle A, won't she?" asked Sad.

"That's a question," replied Tiny, and proceeded to tell them about the missing Frank Ames.

When they retired that night, Sad Sontag had a fairly accurate lot of information regarding things around Sharps City.

"It looks more like a wild-goose chase than ever," he admitted to Swede. "The only enemy Henry Ames had was Torres. It is not unlikely that Torres and some of his men came up here and murdered the two old men. Tiny explained the positions of both dead men. Henry Ames was shot down, prob'ly while lookin' out of the window, 'cause he had hold of the torn curtain. Tiny says Hickory Flynn's body was in a position as though he had tried to reach a gun on the table.

"If it was Torres, nothin' can be done about it. He's jist one of them ex-bandits turned cattleman. Our law can't go down into Mexico and drag him

out for trial. It looks like a dead open and shut case—and still——"

"Still what?" queried Swede.

"Oh, nothin' in particular," replied Sad seriously.

"I hope yuh don't git crazy enough to think of goin' down to visit Mr. Torres," remarked Swede.

"Well, I'll try and git along without him," grinned Sad.

CHAPTER III

THE next morning Sad and Swede went out to the Circle A with Thomas Addington. The ranch buildings, located three miles south-east of Sharps City, were an unpretentious group of part frame part adobe structures, partly hidden in a sycamore grove. The Circle A was not a big outfit, but it was comfortable and homelike.

Mary Blain was down at the stable, feeding a few chickens, when the three men arrived. The banker had decided to tell her the truth as to why he had brought these two men out to the ranch. He felt that Mary could be depended on to keep this a secret. After introducing her to the two men, he explained why they were out there.

"You see, Miss Blain," smiled Sad, "I was in that next room when yore told yore story to Dick Penner."

"You were?" exclaimed Mary. "I had no idea a third party was listening."

"What do you think of the idea?" asked Addington.

"Well, I'm sure I don't know," replied the girl. "I suppose we must have some one here to do the

work. I talked with the sheriff at Mesa and he—well, he said there wasn't anything to work on. But if Mr. Sontag thinks——"

"Ma'am," interrupted Sad, "I don't know what there is to do any thinkin' about. Yuh see, we've only been here one night. We are not detectives, no matter what Dick Penner says. But we do know how to work cows."

Mary looked over him critically.

"I believe you do," she replied. "I'll have Mrs. Miner fix up the bunk-house for you right away."

They untied the war-sacks from their saddles and carried them to the comfortable adobe bunk-house, and stabled their horses. The banker talked with Mary for a few minutes, before going back to town.

Sad and Swede were wandering around the place, getting used to things, when two riders came in. They were both middle-aged men. Mary came out in the yard and shook hands with them. Calling Sad and Swede, she introduced them to Lynn French, owner of the Walking F, and Bill Young, owner of the WY outfit.

Sad could see that both men were curious about them, but said nothing.

"I was talkin' with that slender deputy sheriff about yuh, Mary," said French, "when along comes Bill Young. I tells Bill we better ride out and see how yo're comin' along."

"Lynn, bein' married, was scared to come out alone," grinned Young. "His wife would shore curry him plenty for goin' to see a pretty girl alone."

"No such dern thing," denied French. "Last thing my wife said to me was to find out how Mary Blain was a-gettin' along."

Mary laughed heartily. "You can tell her I said I was getting along fine."

"He won't," stated Young. "He'll say he *heard* you was gittin' along fine. But are yuh gittin' along all right, Mary? We're here to help yuh in any way we can."

"Well, that's mighty sweet of both of you," said Mary warmly. "But I really am getting along fine. You see, Mr. Addington is looking out for things. Mr. Sontag and Mr. Harrigan came to Sharps City yesterday. Mr. Addington knows them well; so he hired them to work for me, until this is straightened out."

French looked quizzically at Sad and Swede.

"Yeah," he nodded, "I'd say they'd do."

Bill Young sniffed audibly.

"I'd never turn down a chance to drink coffee," he said.

Mary laughed and looked towards the kitchen.

"You come right in," she said. "We'll certainly have coffee."

"He didn't smell none, Mary," declared French. "That was jist his way of hintin'. Oh, well, if yo're goin' to make some, I'll have a cup."

Sad and Swede declined the invitation and went to the bunk-house. The two cattlemen rode away about an hour later, and just before noon Jim Orval and the cowboy known as Ocoteo came. Sad and Swede were crossing the yard as they rode in and went to meet them. Orval looked closely at the two cowboys and glanced towards the house.

"We just dropped in," he said. "My name's Jim Orval, owner of the Three Slash spread. Is Miss Blain at home?"

"I'll go up and tell her yo're here," offered Swede.

"Don't bother," replied Orval. "Just goin' past and thought I'd say howdy. Nothin' important. Yo're strangers, ain't yuh?"

Sad nodded. "Just started on this job to-day."

"Yeah? You knowed Miss Blain before, didn't yuh?"

"No-o-o."

"I see. Well——" Orval handed his reins to Ocoteo and got off his horse.

"I reckon I'll just go up and say howdy."

Sad's eyes twinkled. He knew Orval was going up to tell her she was foolish to hire strange cow-punchers. He looked at Ocoteo, a slatternly cow-boy swarthy, dark-eyed.

"How are yuh?" asked Sad.

"Me?" asked Ocoteo quickly.

"You ain't got somebody on behind yuh, have yuh?"

"I wasn't thinkin' what I said," grinned Ocoteo.

"How's everything over at the Three Slash?"

"Purty good."

"Yo're a stranger down here, too, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah—kinda."

"Like it down here better than yuh did in Montana?"

"Montana? I ain't never been up there."

"I jist wondered," said Sad. "Ridin' a Montana rig saddle."

"Is it? I didn't know. Bought it from a feller in Colorader."

"Are you from Colorado?"

"I've been there; been all around."

"Is Orval a good feller to work for?" asked Swede.

"He's got a full crew now," replied Ocoteo.

Swede nodded solemnly. A few moments later Orval came down from the house and mounted his horse.

"Well, we'll see yuh later, boys," he said pleas-antly, and they rode away.

At the noon meal, served in the cool patio, Mary

admitted that Orval was concerned over her hiring strange cowboys.

"I merely told him the same thing as I told Mr. Young and Mr. French," said Mary. "I've felt rather helpless around here, until this morning. It seems that everybody wants to help me. I've known Lynn French and Bill Young ever since I was a baby."

"They sound real," said Sad.

"You bet they are. Mrs. French is a wonderful woman, too. I wish you had known grand-dad and Hickory Flynn. Every time Mr. Flynn got mad at somebody, he would say, 'The sons of hickory!' He had been with grand-dad about fifteen years."

Mary turned away and helped Mrs. Miner clear the table.

Lonnie Welch, the young stage driver, came out that evening in time for supper. Sad and Swede liked him instinctively. He spoke with a Texas drawl, played the guitar and sang well. His job was to make a round trip every two days; from Sharps City to Mesa, one day, and back the next. "Spook" Graves drove the stage on the opposite schedule.

"Well, I dunno," sighed Swede, as he drew off his boots that night. "Every time I see a girl as pretty as Mary Blain, my spirit takes wings. I jist kinda glide around like a swaller in Spring. But it ain't no use of me flittin' and glidin'. Some day, when this here country gits civilized and repeals the laws on justifiable homicide, I'm goin' out and kill me a handsome stage driver."

"Youth calls to youth," said Sad.

"Yea-a-ah?" queried Swede. "Well, I ain't so damn old."

Sad turned from hanging his shirt on a nail.

"Had any calls lately, kid?" he asked.

"If I have," replied Swede gloomily, "my ears are gittin' bad and I didn't hear nothin'."

The next few days were devoid of incidents. The weather was too hot and the flies too bad for them to do any calf branding; so they repaired fences, looked at the water-holes and shifted some of the stock to better grass and water. Addington came out to see how things were getting along, and Orval dropped in twice.

Mary wanted to ride with them, but her own saddle animal had been turned loose the day after her grandafther had been killed. It was a blue-roan gelding, which she had raised and broken.

"Blue likes to run with the wild bunch," she told Sad. "They range back in the hills north of the Mesa road."

"We'll go get him," smiled Sad.

"If you can cut him out of the herd, he'll stop and let you walk up to him," explained Mary. "But as long as he's with the herd, he's one of them."

The following morning Sad and Swede started out to find the wild bunch, which proved to be quite a task for riders who did not know the country. They crossed the Mesa road and went into the broken hills, but there was no sign of the wild horses in there, and it was rather late in the afternoon when they decided to go home.

They struck a long, narrow hog-back ridge, which they found broke abruptly above the winding grades of the Mesa road. The pinnacle gave them a bird's-eye view of the crooked road, which was far below them. Eastward stretched the broken hills to the Mesa country; southward the wide, open sweep of country, stretching far into the land of mañana. To the west, Shell Valley, and beyond that the broken outline of the Fossilshells.

"Yuh can shore get a view of the world from here," observed Swede.

"Our world," replied Sad.

"That's what I meant. Look!" Swede pointed downward and to the east. "Yuh can see the stage comin' along the road. Looks like a little bug."

"It shore does," admitted Sad. "Gosh, we'll have to do some slidin' to get down to that road, Swede. Cut back through the canyon, I reckon."

They watched the stage coming down the grades. It looked like a queer-shaped bug on a narrow ribbon. It disappeared on curves, only to come in sight again farther down the ribbon.

It was nearing a sharp curve almost directly below the two cowboys, when the team swerved in against the rocky wall. A flurry of dust almost obscured the stage for a moment, and to the ears of the two cowboys came the unmistakable, rattling echo of a rifle shot.

As the dust blew aside a figure toppled off the seat of the stage. It might have been a piece of baggage, and it might have been a man. The team swerved away from the wall, full into the sunlight, and it seemed as though there was another figure on the driver's seat, frantically reaching for the lines. At least, that was Sad's impression.

Then the stage, with the team apparently running away, whirled around the curve, and headed down the grades. Two riders swung in behind it, tiny figures at that distance, lashing their horses in an attempt to overtake the running team. Sad was off his horse, kneeling on the rim, straining his eyes. At that distance it was impossible to identify any colours. One of the riders lost his hat, just before they swept out of sight.

Sad got quickly to his feet and climbed into his saddle.

"Looks like a hold-up that didn't work out," he said briefly, and turned his horse back along the pinnacle.

It was a dangerous ride down the side of that canyon, but these two men were used to dangerous riding. It required about thirty minutes to reach the grades, and they galloped east, riding back to the scene of the hold-up.

They found the hat, a huge Mexican sombrero, silver trimmed. But there was nothing about it to denote ownership. They took it with them and rode on around the curve. A man was sitting against the rocky wall, his hat lying in the middle of the road. When he saw them he got slowly to his feet. It was Lonnie Welch the driver.

He grinned painfully, as they dismounted quickly.

"What the hell was it, a hold-up?" asked Sad.

Lonnie nodded. "I guess it was," he said weakly. "I don't know exactly. I seen a man with a rifle—and I guess he shot me. Anyway, it sure knocked me out."

"Where'd it hit yuh?" asked Swede anxiously.

Lonnie, coatless, opened his shirt to show a purple welt over his heart.

"I wore a gun in a shoulder holster," he told them. "I reckon that rifle bullet hit my gun and almost drove it through me. It feels as though I've got some busted ribs. Talk about a knock-out punch! Man, I'm so sore I can't breathe easy."

"Yore team ran away," said Sad.

"Did they? I wondered about that. But I tell you, I was too darn woozy to even think about that team."

"Wasn't there somebody with you?" asked Swede. Lonnie's eyes opened wide for a moment.

"Orval!" he snorted. "I—I wonder what happened to him."

"Was Jim Orval with yuh?" asked Sad.

Lonnie nodded quickly. "He went to Mesa with me yesterday and came back to-day. He was on the seat with me."

"And you took the lines with yuh when yuh fell," said Sad. "Can yuh git up behind me, Lonnie? We've got to investigate."

"You bet!" grunted Lonnie. "Where'd yuh get the hat?"

"Lost by one of the men who shot yuh."

"Them damn Mexicans again!" grunted Lonnie. "Did yuh see 'em?"

"We seen two riders, but they was too far away for us to see what they looked like."

"Where was that feller with the rifle, Lonnie?" asked Sad.

"Right there by the corner of that rock."

Sad got down and examined the broken rubble closely. Stooping down he picked up an empty thirty-thirty cartridge, which he put in his pocket. Then they rode on down the grades, where they found the wrecked stage. Orval was there. One wheel had struck a boulder, upsetting the stage, but the team had torn loose, shedding most of their harness, and went on.

Orval was skinned up a little, clothes torn, limping painfully from a wrenched knee. He seemed glad to be found.

"This was a hell of a mess!" he said. "Welch, I thought they had killed you. You took the lines along; so I had to ride until it crashed. I got out lucky, at that."

"Didja get a look at 'em?" asked Sad.

"Plenty," replied Orval. "They were here when I began to notice things. One of 'em held a gun on me, while the other one got the money box off the stage. I suppose it was the money box."

Lonnie investigated, nodded shortly, as he said, "I dunno how much money was in it."

"You got a good look at 'em, eh?" queried Sad.

"Masked," replied Orval. "Mexicans. Anyway, they talked broken English and they dressed like Mexicans. One didn't have any hat."

"I've got it," said Sad, holding it up for inspection. "What about their horses, Orval?"

"I don't know. I was flat on my back, and they had the horses on the other side of the stage. I was so dazed that it was all over and they were gone, before I realised what was happening."

"Get on behind me, if yuh can," said Swede, slipping his left foot out of the stirrup. Luckily it was Orval's right leg that was injured; so he was able to mount the horse.

There was the usual crowd around the stage office, when the two double-burdened horses arrived. Alexander Shipman, the sheriff, was there, having ridden in from Mesa that morning. Lonnie Welch and Jim Orval told him their version of the hold-up. Sad and Swede told what they had seen from the pinnacle, and Sad gave him the Mexican sombrero.

"Well, boys," decided the sheriff heavily, "it seems to me that some Mexicans intended stickin' up our stage, got nervous in the trigger finger and shot too quick. By this time they are across the border. Here's Mr. Addington. Mebbe he knows what was in that money box."

"I have no knowledge of what was in that money box," replied the banker. "I expected some bonds to arrive to-day. Unfortunately for the robbers, those bonds will do them no good—if they stole them."

"They got the money box," said Lonnie.

"You better have a doctor examine them ribs, Lonnie," advised Sad.

"I'm goin' to do that. Mr. Orval better go along and have his knee fixed up."

"I'll live through it," smiled Orval. "If one of you boys will get me a horse and buggy at the livery-stable, I'll sit here and wait for yuh. The knee is merely wrenched a little."

Sad and Swede were late in getting to the ranch, but supper was kept hot for them.

"I was afraid you had got lost," said Mary.

Sad told her what had happened to Lonnie, and her face went white for a moment.

"Aw, he's all right," assured Swede. "It's darn lucky he was wearin' a gun in a shoulder holster."

"But what a terrible thing to do!"

Sad looked at her thoughtfully for several moments.

"Did Lonnie ever have any trouble with Torres or his men?"

Mary shook her head quickly.

"I doubt if he knows Torres," she replied. "This is the first time that stage has ever been robbed. Why, Lonnie, never has any trouble with anybody. Was Mr. Orval hurt much?"

"Twisted knee and a few scratches," replied Sad. "Lonnie may have a cracked rib or two, but he ain't hurt bad. Yuh see, when that heavy bullet smacked into his gun, it drove it against him awful hard. And a smash over the heart is a knock-out to most any man. Stops the old engine for a moment, knocks all the wind out of yuh and kinda leaves yuh helpless for a long time."

Mary sat silently at the table, while they ate supper. Sad noticed that her eyes were very thoughtful.

"Does it make yuh think?" he asked her.

"I have been wondering," she replied, as she looked at Sad.

"Wonderin' what?"

"Wondering if they—if they'd try it again."

"Yuh mean—try to rob the stage again?"

"They did rob it, yuh know," said Swede, his mouth full of food.

"But they shot Lonnie first," reminded Mary.

"That might have been nervousness," said Sad. "Next time they won't be so much on edge."

"Do you think there will be a next time, Sad?" asked Mary.

"I don't believe it. At least, not unless they know there's money in the box. I don't believe they got anythin' worth their while, and that fact might discourage them."

"I hope so," sighed Mary.

The sheriff and Tiny came out that evening.

"We-ell, we-ell!" exclaimed the sheriff, as he shook hands with Mary. "And how is little Ma-ary Blain this evening?"

Swede had a choking spell, and Sad hammered him on the back. Tiny appreciated it immensely. As a matter of fact, Shipman was not the bluff, hearty Western sheriff as conceived by playwrights; he was small, thin and suffered from indigestion.

"I'm glad to see you again, Mr. Shipman," smiled Mary.

"And I am glad to see you again," boomed Shipman. "It seems that fate drew me in here to be almost at the happening of a near drama."

"Almost and near shore covers it," wheezed Tiny. "Nobody got hurt much, and you was eight miles away at the time."

Shipman gave his deputy a malevolent glance, which meant less than nothing to Tiny Totten.

"Alexander," said Tiny, carefully accenting the

name, "wanted to talk with yuh about it, Sontag. He heard yuh tell all yuh knowed about it; but Alexander is a great feller to listen."

"Tiny, will you ever stop to realise that I'm the sheriff?"

"All right," replied Tiny. "Only I don't have to *stop*, to realise."

Sad told the sheriff, in detail, all they had seen of the hold-up. The sheriff nodded wisely.

"We've got to stop the Mexicans from comin' up here," he said.

"How?" chuckled Tiny. "Uncle Sam would like to know how."

"Sheriff, do you know Torres personally?" asked Sad.

"I do—and I'd like to get my hands on him."

"Bad hombre, eh?"

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders.

"All raiders are bad hombres, Sontag."

"I know Torres pretty good," said Tiny. "I've had meals at his rancho; and he treated me fine. He never tried to cheat the Border Officers out of any cattle revenue tax, and I ain't never heard anybody say he was crooked in cattle deals. I don't say he didn't do the shooting here at this ranch, and I don't say he didn't rob the stage to-day. He's very likely guilty; but he always treated me fine."

"The law," said the sheriff, "don't take note of personal feelin's. The coroner's jury said the shootin' was done by parties unknown, who probably came from south of the border. That kinda puts it up to me to watch for Torres and his gang."

"Meanin'," said Tiny, "that I've got to watch for 'em."

"That's what I've got you over here for," retorted the sheriff. "But if you get 'em, they'll have to

come to Sharps City and stand in the middle of the street, waiting for you, Tiny."

Tiny grinned at the sheriff. "We're a fine pair of peace officers, Alexander."

"Mary, did yore grandfather have trouble with his deputies?" asked Shipman.

"He only had Old Hickory, and they quarrelled all the time," replied Mary softly. "But it was all in fun—like you and Tiny."

"Was yore grandfather a sheriff?" asked Sad curiously.

"One term," replied Mary. "That was twelve years ago."

"Here?"

"Oh, no—in Colorado."

"Plenty wild up there, too," added Tiny. "Hickory told about some gun fightin' up there. 'Course I discounted a lot of it."

"They did have trouble up there," said Mary. "That was how Hickory Flynn got crippled. An outlaw by the name of Jack Ferris shot the cashier of a bank, after robbing him, and Hickory shot Ferris, as he tried to get away. They had Ferris in jail until he was well, and during his trial some one smuggled a gun to Ferris, who got away on the way to court, shot Hickory through the legs, stole a horse and got clean away. When grand-dad went out of office and came down here, Hickory came along. He was too badly crippled to do hard work."

"It didn't cripple his temper," laughed Tiny.

"That was all put on," declared Mary. "Down in his heart he was wonderful."

"I reckon we'll be travelling back," said the sheriff. "I'll be in Sharps City a few days, and I may run out again, Ma-ary."

"Please do, Sheriff. I am always glad to see you."

CHAPTER IV

SAD and Swede rode to Sharps City the next morning and Sad asked Tiny to let him see the empty cartridge shells he had picked up after the shooting at the Circle A. Tiny had them in an empty tobacco sack. Sad compared them with the one he had picked up at the stage hold-up, on which the firing-pin mark on the primer was not distinctive. Three of Tiny's shells bore distinctive marks on the primers.

" By golly, there's three jist alike ! " exclaimed the deputy. " One of the guns that killed Henry Ames and Hickory Flynn shore cuts a funny dent in the primers."

" All of which don't help us a bit, because we don't know who owns the gun. Where's that sombrero ? "

Tiny had the sombrero in a desk drawer, and together they examined it carefully. But there was not a mark on it to indicate maker nor owner. It was rather old, dirty, and the silver trimmings were tarnished.

Ed Felts, Jack Daley and Ocoteo were in town, and Tiny introduced them to Sad and Swede. Lonnie Welch, little the worse for his experience, came along. His ribs were still very sore, but the doctor had told him that none of them were broken.

" I ain't never goin' to laugh at a shoulder holster again," declared Ed Felts. " It sure saved you, feller."

" And I've got the marks to prove it," laughed Lonnie.

Sad and Swede went back to the ranch at noon, no wiser than when they left that morning.

"Everythin' points to Torres and his gang," said Sad. "I'd like to meet and talk with Torres, and I ain't goin' to form no opinion, until I do meet the gent."

"If Torres and his gang are doin' all this an Americano would be mighty welcome down at his rancho," replied Swede. "Especially an American from Sharps City."

"It might be a little dangerous, at that," agreed Sad. "At least them empty shells prove that the same gun was used to murder Ames and Flynn. If Mexicans killed them, it's a cinch that Mexicans didn't use the same gun on Lonnie Welch yesterday. One of the murder guns hits off centre on the primer. And if yuh noticed, all them shells had a scratch near the head. Prob'ly a little burr of metal on the extractor that marks 'em all alike."

"Find that gun," said Swede.

"Yeah—find it."

Mary was anxious for word about Lonnie, and seemed relieved to know that he was all right. She wanted to go to Sharps City that afternoon, and Swede offered to drive the buckboard team for her.

They drove away, leaving Sad alone, except for Mrs. Miner. Sad sprawled out on a bench in the shady patio, rolled a smoke and tried to do a little serious thinking about the happenings in Shell Valley.

He was humped over, chin in his hands, when a sound caused him to lift his head quickly. Three men had stepped through the patio gate and were within a few feet of him. They were all Mexicans, and he knew instinctively that these were Pancho Torres, Rojas Gurrero and Profiro Rodriguez.

Pancho Torres was fat, colourful in his fancy

clothes, and there was a smile in his large, brown eyes. The skinny Rodriguez had a serious scowl on his thin face, and the tiny Rojas Gurrero strutted like a bantam rooster. In his huge hat he looked like an animated toadstool.

" *Buenos dias, Señor,*" said Pancho softly.

" *Buenos dias,*" replied Sad curiously. Pancho's right hand was very close to his holstered gun, and Sad noted that Rodriguez's right hand was concealing one beneath his *serape.*

" Hm-m-m-m-m," murmured Torres. " I'm don' theenk I ever see you biffore."

" I ain't been here very long," smiled Sad.

" You work 'ere, Señor ? "

Sad nodded. " Set down and we'll talk about things. Yore name is Torres, ain't it ? "

" You 'ave 'eard of me, *si* ? "

" Quite a lot, Torres."

" Not ver' good talk, eh ? " Torres' smile was gone now.

" Set down and we'll talk about it."

" The Señorita ees 'ome ? "

" She left for town about thirty minutes ago."

" Ver' sorry ; I'm weesh talk weeth 'er."

Sad leaned back and clasped his hands around his knee. The three Mexicans relaxed. Long ago they had learned not to take any chances on an American cowboy. Torres moved over and sat down on the low curb of the little patio well, where he lighted a brown, Mexican cigarette.

" Yo're kinda takin' chances—comin' up here, Torres," said Sad.

Torres nodded slowly. " Of course. But my frand, theese life ees all chances. I know theese sheriff wan' find me. Americano law would not be good for me. How queek theese Señorita come back, eh ? "

"Not until about supper time, I don't suppose. If you don't want to stay that long, I'll deliver a message to her from you."

"It ees message I mus' deleever myself personally."

Sad nodded, looking curiously at Torres.

"You knew her grandfather was dead, didn't yuh?" he asked.

"*Si.*"

"They're sayin' that you killed him, Torres."

Sad never saw a man's face change as quickly. One moment he was merely a fat-faced Mexican, puffing on a cigarette, smiling; and the next moment his eyes narrowed to mere slits, his lips drew back in a wolfish snarl. It seemed for a moment that the muscles of his huge shoulders would burst through his jacket as he lurched off the curb and came close to Sad.

Sad did not change expression nor position; not even when Torres' muscular right hand slapped down against the butt of his silver and pearl trimmed Colt. For several moments he stood there, glaring down at Sad.

"You say that?" asked Torres harshly.

"I'm tellin' yuh what other men are sayin', Torres."

"W'y they say this theeng about me?"

"Because you had trouble with Henry Ames about cattle. They say you came back and killed both old men."

"That ees lie!"

"Can yuh prove it's a lie, Torres?"

"No! *Madre de Dios*, 'ow can I prove?"

Torres stepped back, drew a deep breath. Gradually the snarl faded from his face, and he mopped his wet brow with the sleeve of his jacket.

"I can prove not'ing," he said slowly. "I come

'ere to-day to tell theese yo'ng lady I do not keel 'er gran'fadder. I am no damn hangel. I 'ave keel men biffore. But theese thing I'm not do."

"You're takin' a lot of chances merely to tell her yuh didn't do it, Torres. That won't do yuh any good, if the sheriff gets yuh."

"No," said Torres softly. "I'm ver' sorry, I——" His manner changed abruptly. "W'at I care a damn for theese shereef? He never take Torres alive. I tak' chance, eh? I wan' talk weeth Señorita Blain. I wan' tell 'er I did not keel 'er gran'fadder. I am jus' damn *Mejicano bandido*, but I'm wan' theese girl to know truth. To hell weeth the law."

"*Cuidado!*" hissed Rodriguez.

A horse was approaching the patio gate. Quickly Rodriguez and Gurrero flattened against the wall, guns in hand. Torres slipped his gun loose, but did not take his eyes off Sad Sontag, who merely grinned and shifted his eyes towards the patio gate.

They heard a man speak to his horse, as he dismounted, and then the sound of his boots scraping on the hard ground, as he came to the gate. Then he stepped inside the patio, jerked back from the prod of Rodriguez's gun in his ribs, and slowly lifted his arms.

It was Jim Orval. Quickly the little Gurrero removed Orval's gun from his holster and stepped away from him.

"Welcome to the party, Orval," smiled Sad. "Set down and rest yore feet."

Orval's eyes shifted from one to another.

"So it's a party, eh?" he said harshly. "Some friends of yours, Sontag?"

"*Quien sabe?*" replied Sad, and Torres grinned.

"Theese man ees Messter Orval?" queried Torres. "I'm never see heem so close biffore."

"This is my first look at you, too," said Orval. "It strikes me that you are Pancho Torres."

"Strike?" said Torres, producing his cigarettes. "That ees good word."

Orval noticed that Sad still had his gun, and laughed shortly.

"They seem to trust *you*, Sontag," he said.

"They can," smiled Sad. "I can always get along with folks."

Torres got slowly to his feet and slipped his gun back in the holster.

"We weel not wait," he said to Sad, and walked over to the gate, where he spoke softly to Rodriguez. The skinny Mexican nodded and remained at the gate, until the others rode up, leading his horse.

"Señor Orval," said Torres, "I weel leave your gon at the gate. *Adios, amigo.*"

And with a clatter of hoofs they swept away from the ranch. Orval limped slightly, as he walked over to the patio gate and looked down the road. Sad still lounged on the bench, and Orval came back to him.

"What was the meanin' of this, Sontag?" asked Orval. "You are a stranger in this country, and still I find you talkin' with that damn cut-throat Mexican—and wearin' yore gun?"

"Is there any reason why he should take my gun?" asked Sad.

Orval shoved his hands deep in his pockets and glared at the tall cowboy.

"You know what will happen to Torres if the sheriff catches him, don't yuh?"

"Sure. As far as that goes, Torres knows, too."

"Suppose the sheriff knows you are a friend to Torres?"

Sad frowned thoughtfully for several moments. Then:

"Orval, did it ever occur to you that it wouldn't be any of the sheriff's business who my friends are? He is not a censor of friendships. But, as a matter of fact, I never seen Torres before in my life."

"Is that so? Then that Mexican is more of a trustin' soul than I ever gave him credit for bein'."

"Meanin' that you wouldn't trust me?" asked Sad.

"Not if I was in Torres' position. I wouldn't trust anybody."

"Neither would I," laughed Sad. "But why should we quarrel? I entertained Torres and company as well as I could. Torres would not hesitate to kill either or both of us, if we tried to take him. We'd do the same thing, in his place. We're not the law."

"No, that's right—we're not."

"How's yore knee to-day?"

"Still a little sore," replied Orval, flexing that member carefully. "I sure got out of that wreck pretty damn lucky. I wish I'd thought to ask Torres what he expected to make out of those bonds he got from that money box. Addington says they ain't worth anything to a robber; so they had all their trouble for nothin'."

"Bunglers," smiled Sad.

"Potential murderers," corrected Orval. "It looks to me as though they deliberately tried to murder Lonnie Welch."

"It looks thataway, but it might have been an accidental shot."

"It could—yes."

Orval got to his feet and hitched up his belt.

"Well, I'll drift along, Sontag. I hope Torres kept his word and left my gun at the gate. I just dropped in to say howdy. How is Miss Blain?"

"She's fine. Her and Swede went to town a while ago."

"I see. Drop over and see us, Sontag. Come any time—be glad to have yuh."

"Thank yuh, Orval; I'll do that."

Sad walked out in the yard and watched Orval pick up his gun at the gate. He waved at Sad, and rode on.

"How's Miss Blain, eh?" muttered Sad. "So that's the idea, is it? He's old enough to be her father; but I reckon they never git too old to know a pretty girl, when they see one."

But Orval was not satisfied with what little Sad had explained about Torres and his men being at the Circle A. He went to town and took the matter up with the sheriff. His tale to the sheriff did not speak well for Sad Sontag.

"I'll find out about all this," declared the sheriff. "You say Sontag didn't give any explanation as to why Torres came to the Circle A?"

"No," replied Orval, "he didn't. And he intimated that it wasn't any of *your* damn business."

"We-ell, I'll find out a few things from the gentleman. Unless I have been misinformed, Tom Addington hired them two waddies."

"Old friends of his, I understand," said Orval.

"Is that so? Suppose we go and talk with Addington?"

The elderly banker was just closing up his day's business, but stopped to listen to what Orval and the sheriff had to say.

"That is very queer," admitted the banker. "I had no idea that Sontag knew Torres."

"I don't say that he does," stated Orval. "I'm merely telling you how it seemed to me. If he *is* a friend of Torres, I don't believe he is the right man to be out there with Miss Blain."

"Well, I'm sure goin' out there and have a talk with Sontag," said the sheriff warmly. "I'll tell *him* a few things."

"No, I wouldn't do that," said Addington.

"Because he is an old friend of yours?" queried the sheriff.

"That isn't true. Gentlemen, this isn't to go any further, and I'm only telling you because of the present situation. Dick Penner, secretary of the cattlemen's association, sent Sontag and Harrigan down here. If Sontag is fraternising with Torres, there is a mighty good reason. If I were you, I'd let Sontag alone."

"Oh-ho-o-o-o!" grunted the sheriff. "Well, that's different."

Orval laughed softly. "That might account for it. The next time I see Sontag, I'll——"

"Pardon me," interrupted the old banker. "I don't want you to say a word to Sontag. In fact, I want you both to consider it something to forget right now."

"Suits me," replied Orval. "I've forgotten it already."

"Same here," agreed the sheriff. "I know Dick Penner pretty well. If he says they're the right men for the job, it sets fine with me, Addington. Orval, we've had all our excitement for nothing."

"Anyway," smiled Orval, "I haven't changed my feelin's towards Torres. Some day I hope to pay him back for liftin' my gun."

"Hop to it," said the sheriff. "You have my permission."

They walked outside and met Lonnie Welch.

"How's the sore ribs?" asked Orval.

"Fine, Mr. Orval," laughed Lonnie. "How's yore knee?"

"Almost well, Lonnie."

"That's fine. I'll take the stage out to-morrow—but I hope they'll keep their bullets to themselves after this."

Lonnie went on down the street.

"He's a great kid," said the sheriff. "I've knowed Lonnie ever since he was in knee pants and bare feet, and I don't reckon there's a mean bone in his body. Some day I hope to dance at his weddin'."

"Is he thinkin' of gettin' married?" asked Orval.

"Most young men do, don't they, Orval?"

"Meanin' that he hasn't picked the future Mrs. Welch yet?"

"Well, he's been keepin' pretty steady company with Mary Blain for a long time; and if I can read signs right, it won't be so awful long before they'll be runnin' the ranch together."

"She's a mighty pretty girl," said Orval thoughtfully. "But I understand that Henry Ames had a son who might stand between Mary and the Circle A."

"He *had* a son," said the sheriff. "Nobody knows where he is now."

"Did you know this son?"

"No. He never was around this country. I don't believe Mary ever seen him, 'cause he left home when she was very young.

"I hope he don't show up. It would be a shame to beat her out of the Circle A, after what her own father done to her."

"That's true. Well, I'm glad we talked with Addington about Sontag."

"That's a forgotten incident," said Orval.

"That's right," nodded the sheriff.

Sad told Mary and Swede about his visit from Torres and his two men, and what happened to Orval when he walked in on the conference. Mary

was concerned over the fact that Torres would dare come to the ranch.

"But what was Orval doin' out here?" asked Swede. Sad smiled and glanced at Mary.

"You don't mean—he's coming out here to see me!" exclaimed Mary, interpreting Sad's smile exactly.

"Well, he didn't say he was," admitted Sad. "But it seems to me he's ridin' quite a long ways just to be neighbourly."

"He may as well save his horses," declared Mary warmly.

"He won't," smiled Sad. "Not if I know Mr. Orval."

CHAPTER V

FOR the next two weeks Sad and Swede gave a very good imitation of two cowboys earning their wages. They stayed fairly close to the ranch, only one of them going to town at a time. Lonnie Welch came out as often as he could, but Jim Orval only dropped in once during that time. Mary pleaded a headache, and did not see him.

It was on a Saturday forenoon, when two men came to the ranch in a buggy. Sad met them at the front porch and tied their horse. One was a tall, cadaverous, bald-headed man, dressed in good quality but ill-fitting clothes. The other was rather chunky, with a decided slouch. His face showed dissipation in every line, a weak mouth, but hard, grey-blue eyes.

" Is Miss Blain at the ranch ? " asked the tall man.

" She's in the house," replied Sad. " Shall I call her ? "

" Never mind—we'll see her."

They walked up to the door, and Sad turned away. He heard the tall man saying something about a lawyer from Mesa, and they both went into the house. Wondering what it was all about, Sad went down to the corral. Swede had gone to town after the mail and some groceries.

It was nearly an hour before the two men came from the house, but Mary did not come out. They stood beside the buggy for a few minutes conversing and finally sauntered down towards the stable. Sad stood at the stable door and waited for them to open the conversation.

"How long have you been here?" asked the chunky one abruptly.

"Speakin' to me?" asked Sad.

"Why—yes, I believe I was," he replied.

"I don't reckon I've ever met you, have I?" asked Sad.

"What's that got to do with it? I asked you how long you had been here."

"Yeah, and I answered yuh."

"You did not!" snapped the man.

"Can't yuh take a hint?"

"A hint? What hint?"

"A hint that you could go plumb to hell for yore answer."

The chunky man flushed hotly, opened his mouth to speak, but closed it, as the tall man touched him on the arm.

"Pardon me," said the tall man. "This is Frank Ames, owner of this ranch since the death of his father Henry Ames."

Sad squinted at Frank Ames, rubbed the side of his nose with his left forefinger and smiled sourly.

"My answer still stands," he said softly.

"Well you don't stand!" snapped Ames. "By God, I'm owner of this place now. Take your stuff and move off."

"You've got a terrible disposition," sighed Sad. "I'm really disappointed in yuh. I suppose it's whisky. You ought to take a cure, before yore arteries harden. No! Don't git mad. That's the worst thing yuh can do. You ort to take a pill and lie down."

Frank Ames made funny noises in his throat, but seemed unable to form words. The lawyer bristled angrily as Sad looked at him.

"Jist about who are you?" asked Sad.

"I'm Daniel H. Leslie, attorney-at-law, from Mesa."

"Prob'ly named after Daniel Webster," mused Sad aloud.

"That is none of your damn business!" snorted the lawyer.

"Did anybody ever compile yore family tree, Dan'l?"

"No! What's the idea of all this crazy conversation?"

"Yo're originally from the East, ain't yuh?"

"Connecticut, if it's any of your business!"

"It's too bad yuh left there and killed the family tree."

"Killed the family tree? What do you mean?"

"Well," replied Sad seriously, "a tree can't live in Connecticut if its sap is in Arizona."

It required several moments for the lawyer to understand Sad's meaning. He glared at Sad, bony hands clenched at his side.

"You think you are pretty damn smart, don't you?" he said.

Sad scratched the point of his left shoulder against the stable door, put his hands on his hips and looked at the two angry men.

"I'm sorry if I've caused you two gents any mental twinges," he said. "You came down here lookin' for information, and I've kinda covered everythin' from where yore friend can go, to yore family tree, Mr. Lawyer. Anythin' else yuh care to know?"

"I don't care to know anything!" snarled Frank Ames.

"I wouldn't have to be a mind-reader to know that," replied Sad. "You prob'ly made that a wish when yuh was young, and got the big half of the wishbone."

"You're fired!" choked Ames. "Haven't you sense enough to know when you're fired?"

Sad laughed at him. "Wrong again. You may be Frank Ames; but until the court orders you to take over this ranch, I'm not fired. I am workin' for Miss Mary Blain, and hired by Thomas Addington. And what is more," added Sad coldly, "I don't like the looks nor talk of either one of yuh; so I'm askin' yuh to git in yore little buggy and roll off the place."

"Why, damn you, you can't——" began Frank Ames angrily.

"Just a moment, Frank," interrupted the lawyer. "There is a bit of truth in what this cowboy says. Certain things must be done before you—well, I'd advise that we go back to town."

"Do you think I'm goin' to let a damn hatchet-faced——"

"Wait, Frank!"

"You better take him off the place," said Sad in a silky voice. "Our hawgs ain't been fed yet."

The lawyer linked arms with Ames and they went back to the buggy. Ames was so mad that he staggered drunkenly. Sad watched them drive away, before going slowly up to the patio. Gone was Mary Blain's last chance to own something; and Sad hated to talk with her about it.

She was sitting in the patio. Mrs. Miner was standing beside her, talking earnestly, but she went into the house as Sad walked across the patio. Mary looked at him and he shook his head.

"Shore tough," he said.

"Well, I've expected it," replied Mary. "I hoped he wouldn't come back. He's like I thought he would be. Mother said he never would amount to anything. Always drinking and living with bad people."

"He looks it," nodded Sad. "Did you know the lawyer?"

"Mr. Leslie? Oh, yes, I've known him quite a while."

"Mary, what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know, Sad. What can I do?"

"Git married, I suppose."

Mary shook her head gravely.

"Sad, I've seen too many poverty marriages. Lonnie wouldn't ask me to marry him—on his salary. It isn't fair for either of us. Lonnie is saving money now. He wants to buy out a little brand and go into cattle. But that is a long time in the future. If I married him—why, don't you see, Sad, the savings would go, and the future would go with it."

"I know. You like Lonnie awful well, don't yuh, Mary?"

"Better than anybody—I guess," softly.

"Uh—huh. Well, shucks!" Sad took off his hat and mopped his brow. "Somethin' has got to be done about it."

"What is there that anybody can do, Sad?" asked Mary.

Sad slowly closed one eye.

Swede met Frank Ames and Daniel Leslie on the road but Swede had already heard about the coming of Frank Ames to Sharps City. Sad told Swede about his conversation with the two men, and Swede laughed heartily.

"Frank Ames shore looks like a rum hound," said Swede. "I hope he dies from a skinful of that Sharps City liquor. Tiny bought me a drink to-day, and when I drank it the sparks flew from my teeth. Honest Injun, that stuff is war-whoop water. No wonder they've got a No Credit sign over the bar in the Trail Herd Saloon."

"What about the sign?" asked Sad.

"They can't take a chance on givin' credit. That liquor will either kill yuh or make yuh crazy, and yuh can't collect from a dead man or a lunatic."

Sad laughed and reached for Swede's sack of Durham.

"I'm goin' to town to-night," he said.

"What for?" asked Swede quickly. "You'll mebbe bust into yore friend Ames again; he's registered at the hotel."

"He is, eh? Well, I might, at that; he's kinda proddy."

Swede looked curiously at Sad.

"You ain't gittin' no bright ideas, are yuh?" he asked.

"Nor tarnished ones either," denied Sad. "It looks as blank as anythin' I've ever seen. But I reckon I'll ride in. Saturday evenin' ought to find plenty folks in town—and yuh never can tell what might happen, with the town crowded thataway."

It seemed as though everybody in Shell Valley was in Sharps City that evening. Jim Orval and his crew were there, as were Bill Young and Lynn French, with all their crews. And Frank Ames was in a fair way to make himself unpopular. They did not care how much liquor he drank, as long as he could handle it gracefully and keep from becoming loud and abusive. Lynn French heard about Ames, took a good look at the gentleman, and went to talk with Tiny.

"That Frank Ames is a fine specimen, Tiny," said French.

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Tiny. "I shore felt awful bad about old Henry Ames passin' on; but I'm glad Frank didn't come here while the old man was alive. Of course, the old man had a good idea what Frank was like, but it's nicer to jist

imagine than it is to see and know. And that's the whippoorwill who is goin' to move Mary Blain out in the cold."

"If somebody don't kill him before he gets the place," said French.

"Well, I'd hate to hang somebody, or git hung myself, for doin' the job. Let's have a drink, Lynn."

Frank Ames was not the sort of a person to stay dormant long, and it was at this point that Sad Sontag came in. Tiny greeted him like a long-lost brother. Daniel Leslie and a local lawyer named Reeves came up to the other end of the bar. Sad grinned at Leslie, who ignored him entirely.

Not so with Frank Ames. He looked upon Sad with owl-like eyes, considered him for several moments and turned to Nelse.

"Whishy's rotten and yore company's rotten," he declared. "I'm gentleman. Yuh shee, I'm par—part—particular who I 'shoshiate with."

Tiny walked over to Leslie and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Take care of yore friend," he ordered, indicating Ames. "He's a lawyer's client now, but if you don't take care of him he'll be a doctor's patient in about a minute."

"He may be my client," said Leslie harshly, "but I have nothing to do about his morals."

"Thasso? Is he paid up?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is him and you all square?"

"What is that to you, Totten?"

"Jist this much," replied Tiny. "If yo're goin' to let him run loose, somethin' awful is goin' to happen to him. I ain't never taken out no vocal cords with my bare hands, and I ain't so sure I know jist where they are nor what they look like;

so if I git a lot more doo-dads that I'm lookin' for——"

"All right," growled Leslie. "I'll see if I can get him to go to bed. How about goin' over to the hotel, Frank?"

"Lemme 'lone!" snorted Frank. "Who you think you are? I'll drink all I wanta and I'll talk all I wanta; and no damn fat cowboy is goin' tell me what t' do."

Tiny reached over, grasped Ames by the collar and shook him with no more effort than a terrier uses in shaking a rat. Ames was no light-weight, no weakling, but he was helpless in the mighty grip of Tiny Totten, who grasped the seat of his pants with his right hand, picked the man up bodily and walked to the doorway.

"Heave ho-o-o-o!" he yelled and pitched Ames out into the street.

There was a crash and a yelp of pain; a clatter of boots on the wooden sidewalk, and a vitriolic curse. Tiny came back to the bar, a queer expression on his face.

"If you hurt him——" said Leslie harshly, starting towards the doorway, just in time to meet Jim Orval and Ocoteo. Orval's right eye was fast swelling shut, and Ocoteo was holding one hand over his left ear.

"Who done that?" demanded Orval hotly.

"What the hell happened to you?" countered Tiny.

"We was settin' on the sidewalk and somebody throwed that drunken Ames on top of us," wailed Ocoteo. "I—I think he kicked my ear off."

"Totten threw him out," said Leslie.

"Tattle tale," said Tiny, his eyes on Orval.

"Well, damn it, what's the answer?" queried Orval painfully.

"I reckon you lose, that's all," replied Tiny. "Next time you'll come inside and set in chairs."

A dishevelled Ames staggered back to the doorway.

"Who done that?" he demanded. "Who threw me out?"

"I threw yuh out, you drunken wobble-mouth!" snapped Tiny.

"I jis' wanted t' know," replied Ames, and turned around. "Goo-night and happy dreams."

"I guess I better get somethin' for my eye," said Orval.

"Don't forget my ear," said Ocoteo painfully, and they went out together.

"So that's the heir to the Circle A," sighed Bill Young.

Without any comment, Daniel Leslie walked out of the saloon and went over towards the hotel. Sad leaned against the bar and puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette. Some cowboys had started a pool game at the rear of the room, and Sad sauntered back to watch them. But the game lacked interest, so Sad left the saloon and walked across the street and sat down in a chair on the porch of the Sharps City Hotel.

He saw Jim Orval and Ocoteo come from the little drug store. Ocoteo went back towards the saloon, and Orval walked slowly towards the hotel entrance. Sad was sitting in the shadows away from the lighted window. Orval went into the lobby, as Leslie came down the stairs. They talked together for several moments in there, and walked out together. Leslie laughed shortly, as they came out.

"That's all right," growled Orval, "but it's so damn easy to overdo a thing."

"That's true," replied the lawyer, as they halted at the edge of the sidewalk.

"Well, I'll see yuh later," said Orval. "I'm goin' home."

"I'll see you to-morrow, if you come in," said Leslie. Orval grunted a short reply, and crossed the street towards the hitch-rack.

Sad finished his cigarette and was about to leave the front of the hotel when Frank Ames came out again. He was still drunk, coatless and hatless. Apparently he had promised Leslie that he would go to bed, partly disrobed, and decided against it. However, he walked fairly straight across the street and entered the Trail Herd Saloon.

Ten minutes later Sad strolled over there and found Ames in a five-handed poker game. He did not see Leslie in the place. Ocoteo was in the game, his left ear badly swollen. Ames was still the loud talker, and seemed to be losing regularly. Sad decided that along with Frank Ames' other failings, he did not have card sense.

In a dozen deals Ames lost two hundred dollars. He searched his pockets, but could not find any more money; and while he was making his search, he was dealt out.

"Gimme cards!" he snorted. "Ain't my credit good in my own home town?"

"No poker credit," said the dealer mildly.

"Well, can yuh imagine that? And me ownin' a cow ranch! No credit, eh? That's a hell of a way to act, feller."

"It's our rule, Ames; and we don't break it for anybody."

Ames tried to borrow from the other players, but they gave him a cold shoulder. Gloomily he watched the game, his fingers itching to pick up cards. Finally he got to his feet, staggering a little, as he went to the bar. The dealer signalled Nelse to let Ames have a drink; but Ames didn't want a drink.

He wanted poker money, and Nelse refused to loan him a cent.

Finally, mumbling his disgust, he left the saloon and went back to the hotel. Sad followed him across the street. There was nobody in the little hotel lobby, so Sad went up the stairs right behind Ames, who paid no attention to Sad, until they were both in Ames' room. Sad closed the door behind them. Ames had left a lamp burning.

"Wha's the idea?" asked Ames indignantly. "Thish is my room."

"Set down there on the bed," replied Sad. "I want to talk with you, Ames."

"Oh, I 'member you now. Yo're the smart cowboy at the Shircle A."

"Correct."

"Whatcha want?"

"How long do you think you'll last around here, actin' thisaway?"

"Wha's it to yuh? I'm 'f age."

"They don't hang 'em here, until they're of age, Ames. Listen to me, you mouthy cottontail, yo're drunk, broke and disliked."

"Zasseo? Broke, drunk and dishliked. Thanks."

"Yo're welcome. Now, are yuh sober enough to listen to reason?"

Ames blinked at Sad for several moments.

"Here's my talk," said Sad. "It'll be months before you can get control of the Circle A. Unless you mend yore ways, somebody will kill yuh long before that time is up. Yo're nothin' but a drunken, irresponsible bum. You ain't fit to own anythin'. Shake some of that whisky out of yore half-ounce brain and listen to me. What will you take for the Circle A outfit in cash?"

Ames opened his mouth, closed it again and blinked at Sad.

"Cash on the nail," said Sad evenly. "And all I want in return is a legal paper, showing that you relinquish all rights to the Circle A and everything on it."

Ames was not too drunk to understand the proposition.

"I—I dunno," he said. "I ain't never—huh, well——"

"Here's my offer," said Sad. "Take it or leave it. For that legally made paper, with your signature properly witnessed, I'll give yuh five thousand dollars in cash."

Ames blinked rapidly and a crooked grin twisted his mouth.

"It's worth more'n that," he muttered.

"That's my offer, Ames. Five thousand in cash. That's a lot of whisky and poker money. The cattle business ain't so good now. If you don't think that's a fair offer, try to borrow five thousand from the bank to-morrow."

Ames wiped the back of his right hand across his lips.

"I've gotta think 'bout it," he said.

"All right. Have Leslie draw up the papers to-morrow."

"Leslie?" Ames squinted at Sad. "Ain't there no other lawyers around here?"

"Sure. I don't care which one yuh hire to do the job. Keep this under yore hat, Ames. But remember, five thousand is a lot of money."

"I'll let yuh know," nodded Ames.

Sad went back down the stairs and mounted his horse at the hitch-rack.

"Bronc, I shore can talk money," he told his horse. "Five thousand cold dollars! If I had that much money I wouldn't be playin' detective in this god-forsaken place."

He held his horse at the hitch-rack while he rolled a cigarette, and he was about to scratch a match when he saw Daniel Leslie come from the hotel. For several moments the lawyer stood on the edge of the sidewalk, looking towards the Trail Herd Saloon. Then he walked diagonally across the street, sauntered down to the livery-stable and disappeared within. Ten minutes later he drove out in a buggy, turned to the left and went out of town, heading south-west.

Sad rode out of town, humming a song.

CHAPTER VI

Sad said nothing to Mary nor Swede about his offer to Frank Ames. In fact, Sad couldn't have purchased the Circle A, if the price had been a hundred dollars. His conversation with Ames was merely to test an idea he had been thinking about. The ranch was worth several times what he had offered Ames; and Sad felt sure that Daniel Leslie had overheard his offer to Ames. The partitions in the Sharps City Hotel were very thin, and Sad felt sure that Leslie would not let Ames sell his heritage for such a small amount.

Sad lay awake a long time that night, and when he did go to sleep he rode a wild nightmare, in which Mexicans, with enormous hats, chased him all over the mountains, and tall, cadaverous lawyers shouted in his ears to stay inside the law.

Although it was Sunday morning, Sad was out of bed at daybreak, and when Swede awoke, Sad, fully dressed, was humped in a chair, smoking a cigarette. Swede looked sleepily at their battered old alarm clock, lifted himself up on one elbow and looked at Sad.

"Ain't you goin' to bed t'night?" he asked.

"Too much sleep is bad for yuh," replied Sad.

Swede sat up in bed. "What's eatin' yuh, High Pockets?"

"Not a thing; I jist ran out of shut-eye, I reckon."

Sad got up and walked over to the front window of the bunk-house. The eastern sky above the hill was painted with the colours of dawn. Streaks of

the same colour flamed along the high ridges, but the near hills were still a cold blue and grey. Sad leaned his elbows on the deep window sill and watched the colours.

His gaze shifted to the hill south of the ranch-house, where some old sycamores were already picked out with colours. They seemed to stand out like partly painted trees on a grey canvas. He started to turn away, when his eye caught a glint of metal. Again came the tell-tale glint, and his sharp eyes saw a moving object near the sycamores. Then the object did not move any more. At least, he could see no movement, although he watched for several minutes. Swede was snoring again, but Sad woke him.

It was only a pressure of Sad's hand on Swede's shoulder, but the stocky cowboy slipped out of bed in a moment, looking curiously at his tall partner.

"I'm prob'ly crazy," Sad said, "but I seen somethin' up there on the hill beyond the house. Flash of light on a gun barrel. Go ahead and laugh."

"Can't a feller yawn?" asked Swede querulously. "Whatcha doin'?"

Sad was swiftly making a queer sort of dummy. He took his pillow and buttoned a vest around it. Then he took a pair of pants and belted them around the lower end of the pillow. He slid the poker of the fireplace down the back of the vest and put his hat on the end of it.

"That looks more like you than you do," applauded Swede. "That wouldn't fool a half-wit, Sad."

"At two hundred yards in this light, it would. Gimme that broom."

With a piece of rope he fastened the broom to the upper part of the dummy, and held it out by the handle.

"George Washin'ton's sister Susie lookin' for work," grinned Swede. "If she could ride, we'd take her along."

Sad walked over to a corner by his bed and picked up an old Winchester rifle. There were two cartridges in it, but he took more from a box on the shelf and filled the magazine. Then he went to the rear window, flung it open and climbed outside.

"You take the dummy and make the exposure," he told Swede. "Keep back from the doorway, and just kinda shove it outside."

"All right." chuckled Swede. "I'll be the gay deceiver. But I hope Mary ain't awake. If she ever seen that limber-legged cowboy come out of the bunkhouse, she'd faint."

Swede picked up the dummy and walked over to the door. Adjusting everything to his satisfaction, he swung the door open and leisurely poked the dummy outside. At a distance it might have looked like a man. Swede chuckled, as he moved it slowly, trying to make it act like a man.

And the next moment something struck the broom a smack, knocked it out of Swede's hands, and the dummy collapsed in the doorway, as the report of a rifle shot echoed through the hills.

The report was echoed by the splitting crack of Sad's rifle. Five times that old thirty-thirty spat wickedly. Swede reached down, yanked the broom and dummy inside and closed the door. Sad came crawling through the window and laid the gun on the bed.

"Rotten light," he grunted, "but I'll bet I scared the tripe out of that feller. Did he hit the dummy?"

"Take a look at the broom, will yuh—and that vest? He got the second button from the top, and I think that bullet is tied up in yore blankets."

Mary was calling from the house and Sad opened

the door wide enough to assure her that everything was all right.

"I was shootin' at a coyote," he told her.

"But not until he shot at you," replied Mary. "I heard that first shot, because I was awake. I'm coming down there."

"You stay where yuh are, young lady. We're both all right, and not hurt a bit—and we don't know that our friend on the hill ain't still there."

Sad tried the dummy again, but with no success. Then he took it through the rear window and made some experiments at the corner of the house. But the shooter was either gone—or wise.

The shots awoke Mrs. Miner, who proceeded to get breakfast. In a short time the sun was shining brightly, and after exposing themselves about the house, Sad and Swede went up to the sycamores. But all they found was a deeply scored place on the trunk of a tree, where one of Sad's bullets had cut a furrow.

They went back to clean up for breakfast, and Sad picked up one of the empty thirty-thirties he had pumped out of the old rifle. He looked at it sharply, cuffed his hat over one eye and looked at Swede, who was wiping soapsuds out of his eyes.

"I've found the gun!" snorted Sad.

"Huh?" Swede spat out soapy water and stared at Sad. "What gun?"

"The gun that fired the bullets into Henry Ames and Hickory Flynn. Look at the primers on these shells!"

"Gawd'l'mighty!" gasped Swede. "Shot with their own gun!"

Sad went back to the bunkhouse and examined the gun. There were no marks to show ownership. Sad went back to the wash-bench and performed his morning ablutions.

"What's the answer?" queried Swede.

"Who knows?" grunted Sad. "Mexicans wouldn't steal that gun and shoot the owner with it. At least, they wouldn't put the gun back where they got it. Swede, the man who engineered that murder is wise enough to know that bullets and empty shells are different in different guns. They wasn't takin' any chances."

"All right," grunted Swede. "But how do yuh account for the killer on the hill a while ago? What have we done to deserve killin'?"

"A secret," said Sad slowly, as he combed his hair, "is only a secret—when *nobody* knows it."

"You think there's a leak?" asked Swede anxiously.

"Go and look at that dummy."

"I hope you haven't lost your appetites," said Mary, from the kitchen door.

Sad smiled and shook his head, his eyes thoughtful.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Mary.

"Something' they call insomnia."

"What about it, Sad? Are you bothered with insomnia?"

"Bothered? Bless yore heart, it saved my life."

"Let's eat, before somebody else starts shootin'," laughed Swede.

They had finished eating, when Frank Ames came to the ranch, driving a livery outfit. He seemed to be cold sober, but his eyes were bloodshot. Sad knew the man was suffering from a hang-over. He was not a braggart now. Sad walked out alone to see him.

"Do you remember the proposition yuh made me last night?" asked Ames. "About buyin' my rights to this ranch."

Sad nodded, watching Ames curiously.

"Five thousand, wasn't it?" asked Ames.

"Yeah, that was the figure," admitted Sad.

"How soon can yuh raise the money?" queried Ames. "Oh, I know the place is worth a lot more than that, but I need money. Yore name is Sontag, ain't it?"

Sad nodded. "Mebbe I can raise the money in a week, Ames," he replied.

"Week, eh? I—I hoped—well, I s'pose a week would be all right. Yeah, that's all right—a week. I'll have the papers drawed up and signed. Have Leslie do it, I reckon. He's as good as any."

"That's all right," agreed Sad. "You'll stay in Sharps City, won't yuh?"

"Sure." He wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"You ain't got a bottle out here, have yuh?" he asked softly. "Gawd, I need a drink the worst way."

"Sorry," smiled Sad. "No liquor out here, Ames."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'll see yuh in Sharps City. Get that money as soon as yuh can."

"Uh-huh," agreed Sad. "But keep still about the deal."

"You bet! Well, I'll be rollin' back. See yuh later."

Swede and Mary were curious to know what Frank Ames wanted, and Sad told them, in strict confidence, what he had proposed to Ames about buying his claim on the ranch.

"That's dirt cheap," said Swede. "But where could yuh ever get five thousand dollars, Sad?"

"No place," smiled Sad. "But Ames don't know it."

"I don't see the joke," complained Swede. "You do the dangdest things, anyway."

"I know it," admitted Sad. "But I'll make yuh a bet that before the end of the week, I can buy it for half that amount."

"Sa-a-ay!" snorted Swede. "If Ames sold this place for twenty-five hundred dollars, he'd be crazy."

"That's a matter of opinion," grinned Sad. "To my way of lookin' at it, he'd be lucky to git that much."

"You'll excuse him, won't yuh, Mary?" asked Swede. "Once in a while he gits them kinda fits. Humour him along and he won't git violent. Saddie, how would you like to go up to the house and cut paper dolls?"

Sad looked seriously at Mary and shook his head.

"He always talks about cuttin' paper dolls, jist before he throws a fit, Mary," he told her. "Let's go away and give him room."

"Does he need such an awful lot of room, Sad?" asked Mary.

"Acres and acres. You should see him throw a good one."

"All right; I pass," declared Swede. "Jussa-same, I can't see yore deal with Ames. It's all cock-eyed to me."

"Was Frank Ames drunk?" asked Mary.

"He's on the edge of fallin' in a snake-pit," replied Sad. "Give him all the Sharps City whisky he wants for a week, and a straight-jacket won't hold him. That is, if somebody don't kill him before the week is up."

Tiny Totten rode out that afternoon.

"The sheriff is holdin' down Sharps City, and there ain't enough crime to go around," he told them. "Anyway, I wanted to git away from Frank Ames. Daw-gone, that feller shore rubs me the wrong way."

"Drinkin' again?" asked Swede.

"Yes," corrected Tiny. "He says he's found the fountain of youth in the Trail Herd Saloon."

"How about a little game of pitch?" asked Swede. "Two-bits a corner and ten-cent set-back."

"I'll play long enough to find out if it's two to one," agreed Tiny. "I play a honest game myself."

It was almost supper time, and odours of fried chicken were drifting through the bunkhouse door, when Lonnie Welch rode in. Instead of going to the house, he came hurrying down to the bunkhouse—which was unusual, because Mary seldom came to the bunkhouse.

"C'mon in, Lonnie," called Tiny. "Bust up this game, will yuh? I'm four-bits ahead of these robbers."

"It's busted," said Lonnie. "The sheriff said he thought you was out here. He wants yuh to come in right away."

"Somebody swaller a pin?" asked Tiny, shoving back from the table.

"Somebody murdered Dan Leslie, the Mesa lawyer."

"No!"

"I found him about two miles out of Sharps City, when I came in with the stage this afternoon. His buggy horse was tangled up in the brush beside the road, and Leslie was dead, all doubled in between the seat and the dash. Shot through the heart."

"Well, can yuh imagine that?" snorted Tiny. "And me with a big chicken supper jist around the corner! What the hell does Alexander want me for? They've got the body, ain't they?"

"Yeah, they've got the body. The sheriff went out and got it."

"What are the details, Lonnie?" asked Sad. "How long had he been dead?"

"I don't know, Sad. Is there any way of tellin' how long a man has been dead?"

"A good doctor can tell within a few hours."

"They had the doctor along, but I didn't hear what he said."

"Was he goin' from Sharps City, or comin' from Messa?"

"I don't know that either, but it was a Sharps City livery rig. I know the outfit well."

"Oh, shucks, I s'pose I've got to leave, boys," sighed the big deputy. "Dang the luck, any way!"

"Duty is callin' yuh," said Swede.

"Duty, hell; it's that cock-eyed sheriff! Well, all I can say is that he's yellin' for the brains of the office to come in and do some thinkin' for him."

Tiny went up to the house and apologised to Mary and Mrs. Miner for having to leave before supper.

"Yuh can set Lonnie in my chair," he told them. "And if I catch the killer of Dan Leslie, I'll shore git even for missin' them yaller-legged chickens."

"Isn't that a terrible thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Miner.

"Well, I hope to tell yuh it is!" snorted Tiny. "I dunno when I'll git another invite to chicken."

"I mean the murder of poor Mr. Leslie."

"Oh, him! Yeah, I guess it is. Well, thanks, anyway."

"If you could come back later this evening," suggested Mary. "Cold fried chicken isn't so very bad—and we'll have plenty."

"I'll do it, by gosh!" agreed Tiny. "I—well, it might be that the sheriff will want me to haul the corpse to Mesa, and if he does, I'll bring it out—uh—no, he won't either, I don't reckon. Well, I'll be seein' yuh—and thanks a lot."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Mrs. Miner. "Would he bring a corpse out here?"

"Tiny gets excited over fried chicken," laughed Mary.

But Lonnie knew several details which he had neglected to tell Tiny.

"I heard the sheriff talkin' to Buck Short, the man who runs the livery stable," said Lonnie. "Buck said that Leslie hired a rig about nine o'clock last night. He didn't tell Buck where he was goin', and Buck naturally didn't ask him. That was the last Buck seen of the rig, until the sheriff brought it back this afternoon. Nelse Sorensen said he closed up the saloon about two o'clock this mornin', and when he was lockin' the front door, he seen a horse and buggy stop at the front of the hotel. He says he didn't pay no particular attention, but he's sure it was the same rig. Leslie had a room at the hotel, and the chambermaid says the bed wasn't slept in last night."

Sad nodded thoughtfully.

"What did the doctor say about the shot that killed Leslie?" he asked.

"Well, all I heard was that the gun was held close to him. They said his shirt was burned from the powder. Whoever shot him must have just walked away and let the horse loose. The lines had been broken."

Sad drew the dummy out from under the bed and showed it to Lonnie, explaining at the same time what had happened that morning.

Lonnie shuddered. "What's it all about?" he asked.

"I hope we live to find out," replied Sad grimly.

"There goes the supper gong," said Swede. "We better run a zigzag across the yard, I reckon; yuh never can tell who's out there in the hills with a rifle."

CHAPTER VII

In Sharps City the sheriff was making an investigation. He realised that there had to be a reason for the murder of the lawyer; and he was seeking that reason. He found Frank Ames in the Trail Herd Saloon, half drunk, but not belligerent.

" I dunno a thing about it," declared Ames. " The last time I seen Leslie was when he went to the hotel with me last night. I got throwed out of the saloon; so I reckon he thought I needed a nurse. But I didn't go to bed; I went back to the saloon. I dunno where Leslie went; he wasn't there."

" Leslie brought yuh up from Mesa, didn't he ? " asked the sheriff.

" Yeah, that's right. I knowed that my dad lived here, and I was on my way here to see him. I knowed Dan Leslie when he was a lawyer in Denver, and when I met him in Mesa he told me about dad gittin' killed. He said I'd need a lawyer to prove my claim to the Circle A; so I—well, I took him."

" He had the room next to you ? "

" Yeah."

" You didn't hear him come in about two o'clock this mornin', eh ? "

" Nope. I was drunk and sick when I went to bed, and I never heard anythin'."

Jim Orval and Ocoteo came in and listened to the questions. They had heard about Leslie's death.

" Sheriff, how much money did Leslie have on him when yuh found him ? " asked Orval.

" Not a dime, Orval. Why do yuh ask that ? "

"Because I gave him two hundred dollars last night."

"Yuh did, eh?" queried the sheriff. "That's somethin' else. Who knew he had that money?"

"Only Leslie and me," replied Orval.

"When did yuh pay it to him?"

"Last night. He drove out to my place about ten o'clock."

"So that's where he went with that livery rig, eh? What time did he leave yore ranch, Orval?"

"Must have been well after midnight. They tell me Lonnie Welch found the body. It's kinda funny about that money."

The sheriff eyed Orval thoughtfully.

"I know what yo're thinkin'," he said slowly. "But I've known Lonnie a long time, Orval. We better forget that. Anyway, Lonnie was in Mesa last night. My idea is that the man who killed Leslie got the money."

"But who would kill him, sheriff?"

"*Quien sabe?* I don't like to say things about a man after he's dead and can't defend himself, but Leslie didn't have a awful good reputation. Oh, he was plenty shrewd, and as far as I know he stayed inside the law. But he made enemies."

Tiny came to town and got in touch with the sheriff.

"Yeah, I know all about the killin'," said Tiny. "Now that I'm here, what's on yore mind?"

The sheriff explained about Leslie's trip out to the Three Slash ranch and the payment of two hundred dollars to Leslie from Orval.

"And Leslie's pockets didn't assay a cent," said the sheriff.

"I suppose," replied Tiny, "that yore theory is that Leslie was killed for revenge, and they took

that two hundred as sort of a by-product, as yuh might say."

"Don't be so damn sarcastic," snorted the sheriff. "I've got as much brains as you have."

"If you think I'm goin' to give yuh three cheers for that, yo're crazy; I know my own limitations. Who knew he had the two hundred dollars in his pocket?"

"Orval and Leslie."

"That narrows it down to Orval," grinned Tiny.

"Don't be a fool; Orval paid Leslie."

"Didja question Frank Ames?"

"I questioned him first. He was drunk and sick all night."

"Yeah, we can leave Ames out," agreed Tiny. "It's my opinion that somebody follered him in from Mesa, met him on the road and shot him. You know, Leslie wasn't no angel."

"I reckon that's what happened. I'll go in and bring the coroner here to-morrow. In the meantime, you keep yore ears open."

Tiny kept them open until after the sheriff had gone, and then headed for the Circle A, lured by the promise of cold fried chicken. Mary Blain kept her word, and Tiny sat down to all the chicken he could eat—which was plenty.

He told them all he had learned from the sheriff, and expounded his own theory.

"There ain't nobody in Sharps City that even knew Leslie well enough to murder him. Only Orval and Leslie knew that Leslie had the two hundred dollars; so it's a cinch he wasn't murdered for the money."

"Did you see Frank Ames?" asked Mary.

"Oh, shore. Still drunk."

"I should be proud of my uncle, I suppose,"

said Mary. "I was looking through the old family album and I found his picture when he was about six years of age."

"I'd like to see it," said Sad. "I like old pictures, Mary."

Mary got the album, which contained the usual number of old cabinet photographs, some tintypes and a few fairly recent pictures. Mary could only name a few of the old ones. She showed them the early photograph of Frank Ames, and they all agreed that Frank had changed remarkably.

There were some loose, unmounted pictures in the album. Lonnie picked up one of them.

"Why, that's Hickory Flynn, isn't it, Mary?"

"Why, I'd forgotten that old picture," said Mary. "It was taken up in Colorado, when Grandpa was sheriff. That's Hickory and Jack Ferris, the outlaw, who crippled Hickory."

It was undoubtedly a good likeness of Hickory Flynn, but Jack Ferris had moved his head at the instant of exposure, which left his face a blur. They were sitting on a bench in front of a building, and every detail of the picture was extremely sharp, except the face of Ferris.

"Ferris didn't want his face on paper, I reckon," laughed Lonnie.

Sad turned to Mary. "Have you got such a thing as a magnifyin' glass?" he asked.

"I seen one on the mantel," said Swede. "Saw it to-day."

It was an exceptionally good glass. Sad held the picture under the lamplight and focused the glass carefully. Then he handed the picture back to Mary.

"Put this in a safe place," he said seriously.

"What's the idea?" asked Tiny.

"I can't tell yuh now, Tiny; but that picture is

worth a lot to Shell Valley. Put it away, Mary; we may need it again."

"We'll all shut our eyes and let her hide it," suggested Lonnie.

Mary hid the picture, and a little later Tiny and Lonnie rode away. Down in the bunkhouse Swede looked intently at Sad when that individual remarked that he knew one thing—sure.

"What's that?" asked Swede.

"I'm not going to pay Frank Ames five thousand for this ranch."

"Hell, I didn't need any photograph to tell me that!"

Sad chuckled softly as he pulled off his boots.

"The next thing you'll be hintin' is that yuh know who killed Dan Leslie," said Swede.

"Sure," nodded Sad seriously. "And why he was killed, too."

"If fried chicken done that to me, I'd stick to ham and eggs," grunted Swede.

"They shore do sharpen the old brain," grinned Sad. "And while we're discussin' brains—don't forget what happened to that dummy this mornin'. It might happen again—and not to a dummy."

But nothing happened next morning. Swede went to Sharps City to get the mail and find out what was being done about the murder. It was Mary who saw the smoke in the hill west of the ranch, and called Sad. The range was very dry at this time of year, and there was always danger of fire.

"I'll take a look at it," said Sad quickly. "But I'm afraid it'll take a lot of fightin' to stop a fire in there."

He ran to the stable and was saddling his horse, when Mary came running.

"Saddle the brown mare for me, Sad," she said. "I've ridden her before, and I want to go along."

"You better stay here, Mary," he replied, yanking his cinch.

"No; I want to ride with you—please."

"Oh, all right," grudgingly. "Anyway, it's only a couple of miles."

He caught the brown mare and saddled her quickly, while Mary donned overalls, boots and a blue shirt. She was no impediment to Sad, because she rode like a cowboy and asked no favours.

"It's sure a blessin' that there ain't no wind," said Sad, as they spurred along together. "It might be that we can handle this ourselves."

The fire seemed to be confined to the head of a small canyon, but beyond that were miles of brushy hills, tinder dry, where a fire would outrun a horse. As they started around the head of the canyon Sad caught a glimpse of a man rising up from behind some brush on the canyon rim beyond the fire.

Yelling a warning at Mary, he spurred his horse across her path, trying to turn away; and the next instant a bullet struck his lurching horse. The animal pitched forward on its neck, throwing Sad headlong, and Mary's horse, frightened by the report of the rifle and the fall of Sad's animal, whirled back and bolted with her.

Sad was stunned for several moments. His left wrist was badly wrenched and his face cut by sharp thorns. His gun had been thrown from his holster and was somewhere in the brush. Sad knew now that the smoke had only been a trap to draw him out there.

Crawling as swiftly as possible, he headed back through the brush, cutting in closer to the rim of the canyon. A bullet smashed into the brush behind him and another whined off a rock back at the spot where he had been thrown.

The ambushers were doing a little preliminary

prospecting, it seemed. They did not know Sad had lost his gun, and Sad reasoned rightly that they would try and kill him at long range. His best bet was to keep concealed and work away from that immediate vicinity. He did not dare try to locate them.

Working down a little brushy washout, he reached the rim of the canyon. Here was a dyke of rock thrust out from the wall of the canyon, and Sad decided that he could work his way down to the bottom along this outcropping. The smoke and fire was off to his left, and the screen of smoke would give him some protection. Muttering a prayer that Mary had escaped and gone back to the ranch, he slid over the edge and started down the slope.

It was slow work, hugging in against that cliff, taking advantage of every handhold to let himself down. He was half-way to the bottom, when a projection pulled loose, sliding him away from the cliff, and he went to the bottom in a wild slide, taking a ton or more of rubble along with him.

Beyond the loss of considerable skin he was unhurt, and as he dug himself out of the rubble he heard a wild yell from the opposite side of the canyon. A bullet screamed off a rock beside him, as he ran down the boulder-strewn bottom of the canyon.

Another bullet struck in front of him, fired from the same side, and as he went around a bend in the canyon a bullet came from the other side whispering past his ear and splattering against the rocky wall.

Then he ducked around the corner and was safe for a moment. Beyond him the canyon opened and the old water-course was well filled with brush. That was where they would expect him to go, and by riding the opposite rims, they could smoke him out.

Sad, panting heavily, ducked in against the broken cliff, backed into a fissure, where the man on the south rim could not see him, and considered his situation. He swore at himself for ever leaving his gun back there in the brush. He believe now that he should have taken time to search for it. If he had his gun he could stay in that fissure until dark, defying any one to come down in the canyon and find him.

There was one bad point about his present situation. It was barely possible that they knew where he was, and he was very sure he did not know where they were. The fissure he was in extended to the rim of the canyon, and after examining it closely he decided that it would be possible for him to climb up the fissure. He reasoned that the last place they would ever expect to find him would be on the north side of that canyon; so he removed his boots, fastened them to the back of his belt, and began climbing.

His weakened left wrist annoyed him, but the fissure was rough, with plenty of angles and foot-holds. Wedging himself carefully, he rested at frequent intervals, and in a surprisingly short time he was peering over the top of the fissure, elbows and knees rasped raw and bleeding.

Satisfying himself that no one was in sight, he drew himself out of the fissure and sprawled among the broken rocks to rest a while. He drew on his boots, rubbed a cramp out of his right leg, and decided to go away from there. Taking it for granted that his pursuers were farther down the canyon, he decided to work his way back around the head of the canyon, find his gun if possible, and head for the Circle A. The fire had about burned itself out by this time.

There was not as much cover on this side, and

Sad was going carefully, when he saw a rider on the crest of a ridge beyond the spot where his own horse had been killed. Apparently the rider saw Sad at the same time, because he lifted his rifle and fired a shot in the air. Then he spurred off the ridge, heading towards Sad.

There was nothing for Sad to do except run. There was no use trying to get back into the canyon. And as he ran he swore at himself for being such a fool as to leave cover. Crashing through brush like a frightened animal, he crossed a ridge, dropped into a deep swale, cut back to the south-west and fell in behind a mesquite clump, just as two riders came tearing down through the brush. One of them passed within fifty feet of Sad.

Then they circled back, knowing that they had passed him. This time they passed him by a bigger margin. Coursing back and forth, like hounds looking for a scent, they drew farther away. Sad crawled a hundred feet to a heavy growth of sage, got to his feet and, humped over close to the ground, cut back towards higher ground.

The pursuit came back down the swale again. There was no conversation among the pursuers; they hunted silently, except for the smashing of brush by their horses. But Sad kept going, when the sound of their passing died away, and crouched flat when they rode past again.

He came out on a west slope. Below him was the ruin of an old mine. The shaft house and other buildings were in a tumbledown state. Beyond them were the dumps of several old tunnels. The pursuit was behind him now, and Sad decided to take a chance and reach the old buildings. Beyond the old workings the hills were heavily brushed.

Down the slope went Sad, aching in every muscle and joint. High-heeled boots were not made for

running purposes, and he ran with the peculiar stiff-legged jerk of a man who spends most of his life in the saddle.

He reached the old shaft-house in safety, but as he halted in the doorway, one of the pursuers saw him and smacked a bullet into the old wall a few feet away from him. Sad ran through the old building, out through a broken place on the other side, trying to keep the building between himself and his pursuers.

Bullets hummed around him, as he staggered over an old dump. He clawed his way around a pile of old mine timbers and began climbing. Sweat was pouring into his eyes and he realised that he must find dependable cover very quickly.

It had been a gruelling race, and Sad was not a racer. Clawing his way along, trying to reach the heavy brush, he discovered his way blocked by a cave-in of an old tunnel. Some of the old lagging were sticking out of the ground. Here was a hole which led somewhere. The timbers had blocked the earth for a space large enough to admit the body of a thin man.

Sad did not consider the danger ; he crawled like a lizard. Sliding in feet-first—a tight fit—his feet swung into space. Slowly his head followed the rest of him, and he dropped a few feet to the bottom of the old tunnel.

The ground was very hard outside, and he felt sure that he had left no tell-tale marks. At least, death would be no more painful in there than it would be on the hillside, he decided. He listened, but could not hear anything.

There was a little light from the hole in the roof, and Sad began investigating. From where he came in, to the mouth of the old tunnel, the cave-in had blocked it entirely. The other way seemed fairly

open, and the tunnel was very dry. He squatted against the wall of the tunnel and waited to see what might happen. He did not believe that a man on a horse could see the hole in the tunnel roof. It might not be very visible even to a man standing upright.

For at least an hour Sad sat there silently, watching and listening. He had found an old pick handle for a weapon. Any one trying to come through that hole would be helpless against that heavy piece of hickory. Sad almost hoped they would try to come in.

He decided that he would stay in here until dark, and he wondered if Mary had reached home safely. Swede would be worried, and would very likely enlist the sheriff to help find him.

Another hour passed, and Sad decided that he was safe. Just to pass away the time he decided to explore the old tunnel. He had a plentiful supply of matches, but after going about twenty feet he found a half-used miner's candle, which he lighted.

The tunnel was only six feet from floor to roof, and about five feet in width, beyond where it had been timbered. The old tracks had been removed before abandonment. There were small side tunnels, where leads had been followed a short distance. Sad noticed a peculiar odour as he worked farther into the tunnel. Was it bad air, he wondered? The candle seemed to burn all right; so he went on.

Suddenly he was at the face of the old drift. He started back with a sharp exclamation of horror. Seated on the rubble at the face of the drift, leaning against the rocky wall, was a man. A dead man, to be more exact. He was fully dressed, except for a hat, and he seemed to be grinning at the light.

Sad leaned weakly against the wall and looked at him. It was a shock to Sad's nerves for a moment.

Then he reached down and felt of the man's face. It was like rawhide.

"Pardner," he said softly, "yo're in a fair way to bein' a danged mummy. I wonder if you died with that grin. Death ain't so bad, if that's the way it strikes yuh. I wonder who the hell you was, anyway."

Pulling aside the lapel of the dead man's coat, he felt in an inside pocket. There was nothing in there, except an old envelope, in which had been pencilled a lot of figures, and the address, Bud Blain, Sharp City, Arizona.

Sad lifted his eyes and looked at the dead man.

"So yo're Mary's father, eh? I've wondered where yuh went."

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN Swede came back from town Mrs. Miner told him about the fire, and that Mary rode out there with Sad. There was no sign of smoke now, and Mrs. Miner was not exactly sure just where it was.

Noontime came, and Swede ate alone. Mrs. Miner said she had heard Sad say that the fire was only a couple of miles away ; and with no sign of the fire now, why didn't they come back ? It worried Swede. And as time passed he became more worried. In fact, he became so worried that he saddled his horse and went hunting the scene of the fire.

He rode to the edge of the canyon and followed it around to where he could see the burned spot at the head of the canyon. The fire was out now. But as Swede rode around towards the head of the canyon, his horse shied suddenly. Swede jerked it to a stop and swung down quickly.

Here was Sad's horse, piled up in the brush, its neck broken by a bullet. Swede made a swift examination of the horse, and the surrounding ground. It told him nothing. He started back to his horse, when his toe struck a hard object. With a sharp exclamation, he reached down and picked up Sad's Colt .45. Every chamber was loaded.

Swede's face was white as he climbed on his horse and raced for the road to Sharps City.

" They trapped him with that fire," muttered Swede. " They knew that no range man ever ignores a smoke. Oh, the dirty devils ! And they got Mary, too ! "

Swede came into Sharps City so fast that his horse

slid up on the sidewalk in front of Tiny's office. The sheriff and coroner were in there with Tiny. The inquest was over, and the coroner was ready to go back to Mesa. Jim Orval and Lynn French were across in front of the Trail Herd Saloon and they came running. Swede didn't take time to back his horse off the sidewalk, but blurted his news.

"I don't get this!" interrupted the sheriff. "You say 'they' got him, Harrigan. Who are they?"

Swede looked at him blankly, not realising that the sheriff did not know about the shooting of the dummy. Gripping his hands at his sides, Swede told them about it.

"But why?" asked the sheriff. "Why would anybody shoot him?"

"Because they're scared—damn 'em?" snorted Swede. "They know Sad'll git 'em."

"Get 'em for what?" asked French.

"Oh, Gawd!" wailed Swede. "Will yuh stop arguin'? Git yore horses and come with me. Don'tcha realise they've got Mary Blain, too?"

"C'mon!" snapped Tiny.

Lonnie Welch had been kept in town for the inquest. Some one passed the word to him, and he joined the posse, as they rode out of town. Lonnie was a greatly worried boy, but saying nothing and riding next to Swede. All he knew was that Sad had, in some way, met disaster, and Mary was missing.

They rode swiftly to the spot where Sad's horse had been killed, examined the ground thoroughly and gazed upon the scene of the decoy fire. No one seemed to know what to do; so they all rode over to the Circle A, where they told Mrs. Miner.

"The thing to do," said Orval, "is to go down to that damn Torres ranch."

"Do you think they were taken down there?" asked the sheriff.

"I do. It's the only logical solution."

"I can't do it," replied the sheriff. "I haven't any right to go down there, Orval."

"That don't prevent the rest of us. To hell with international complications. A girl has been kidnapped."

"Them's my sentiments," agreed Lynn French.

"I'll take my gang," offered Orval. "Why, we can get enough men to whip Mexico, as far as that goes. But I wouldn't go to-night, and I'll tell yuh why. Torres will be watchin' too close. Give him time to feel that he's safe. Let's go to-morrow night, boys. We can sneak down there in the dark, pull a surprise on 'em, and if they're holdin' Sontag and the girl, we can save 'em both."

"That's sense," agreed Tiny.

"Remember, yo're an officer of the law, Tiny," said the sheriff.

"If yuh think that'll stop me, I'll resign," replied Tiny.

"I'll bring my boys," offered French. "And I know damn well Bill Young and his crew will gladly go along."

"Then that's settled," said Orval. "It's our only bet, and I'd like to make a bet that we find the girl."

"What about Sontag?" asked Swede quickly. "Won't we find him?"

"I don't say we won't."

Lonnie stayed at the ranch with Swede. The boy was badly shaken.

"Can't me and you go down to Torres' rancho, Swede?" he asked.

"Let's wait a while, Lonnie. Oh, I know how yuh feel. My Gawd, my pardner is in their hands. It's hell to wait—but best. Hang on to yourself."

"Are you hangin' on to yourself, Swede?"

"I—I'm tryin' to, Kid. Somethin' tells me that everythin' will be all right. Hell, it's got to be all right."

"You found his gun, Swede?"

"Yeah, I found his gun. I think his horse fell and threw him. Mebbe he lost the gun—and still got away. Damn it, don't stare at me thataway! Don't lose yore nerve."

"They've got Mary."

"Gawd, you make me mad, Lonnie."

"Swede, why are they tryin' to kill Sad?"

"Because Sad—well, they're tryin' to kill him, because he came here to find out who killed Mary's grandfather and his old pardner."

"Does he think it's Torres and his gang?"

Swede laughed shortly. "Torres and his gang ain't afraid. Suppose he proved it was Torres? He's safe in Mexico. Hell, he wouldn't be bush-whackin' us. Did you ever see a Mexican able to hit a vest button at two hundred yards? And don'tcha forget that Torres and his two bandit pals was there in the patio with Sad a long time. If they wanted to kill him that bad, wouldn't they have done it then?"

"Then you don't believe Mary is down there, Swede?"

"Lonnie, I only believe what I can see—or what Sad tells me."

It was about nine o'clock that night when Sad limped up to the bunkhouse. Lonnie and Swede were in there, trying to cheer each other up, when Sad limped in.

"My Gawd, where you been?" snorted Swede. "Sad! You old son-of-a-gun!"

"Mary!" blurted Lonnie. "Where is she, Sad?"

Sad looked at them blankly. "Didn't she come home?"

"She didn't, Sad," replied Swede. "I found where they killed yore horse, and I found yore gun."

"I'm glad yuh found the gun. I shore missed that gun."

Swede told about going to town to get the posse, and what they decided to do to-morrow night. Sad told them what happened to him, but did not mention the corpse of Bud Blain.

"So they think Mary is down in Mexico, eh?"

"Orval offered to bet they'd find her there," said Swede.

"We're goin' down there in force to-morrow night," said Lonnie miserably.

Sad looked pityingly at Lonnie. Swede got busy, digging up all the liniment and iodine possible. Sad's left wrist was badly swollen, and his skinned knees and elbows needed attention. His feet were blistered, and so swollen that it was almost impossible to remove his boots.

"Personally," said Swede, "I don't believe Mary is down in Mexico."

Sad looked up from massaging his toes.

"Yuh don't?" he said curiously. "Why don'tcha, Swede?"

"Because I don't believe it was Mexicans that stole her. Sad, you know damn well it wasn't Mexicans that tried to kill you to-day."

Sad smiled and reached for the iodine.

"To tell yuh the truth, I don't know who they were nor what they looked like," he confessed. "I was too damn busy, tryin' to save my own skin. But I can't agree with you on that Mexican idea."

Swede swallowed heavily, put his hands on his hips and glared at Sad.

"By any chance, did one of them fellers hit you on the head to-day, Sad?"

"No-o-o."

"It must be the heat. Lonnie, that feller is crazy as hell."

"If he says she's in Mexico——" said Lonnie.

"That's the boy," grinned Sad.

"But can we save her?" asked Lonnie. "My God, Sad, we've got to save her. I'll go down there alone. I'll——"

"You won't have to," said Sad calmly. "We're goin' with yuh."

"When?" asked Lonnie quickly.

Sad turned to Swede. "Will yuh ask Mrs. Miner to cook me some bacon and eggs? And a lotta coffee."

"Yo're danged right! Goin' right up there."

Swede headed for the house. Lonnie humped on the end of a bunk, looking gloomily at Sad, who was struggling to put on his boots again. Sad grimaced with pain, but managed to get them on. He looked at Lonnie, heaved a deep sigh and began rolling a cigarette.

"Lonnie," he said thoughtfully, "there's a tall grey bronc in the corral. Mary says he's been rode a few times. See if yuh can coax him into lettin' yuh saddle him. Git one of the saddles out of the shed—either one of them two big ones."

"All right," said Lonnie, walking to the door. "Are you goin' to town to-night, Sad?"

"If anybody asks yuh," replied Sad, "don't tell 'em we're goin' to Mexico."

Lonnie closed the door behind him, and Sad heard him running down towards the corral. Swede came in from the house.

"Mrs. Miner's so glad you're back, she's willin' to cook supper for everybody in Shell Valley. She's

got an idea that yo're the only person on earth who can find Mary. When I told her you was back, she said, 'Thank God! Now we'll have Mary back soon.'"

"That's real faith," said Sad seriously. "You might go down and help Lonnie saddle that grey horse for me. I imagine he'll need help."

"Grey horse? Where you figurin' on goin', Sad?"

"To the Torres rancho—if Lonnie can find his way in the dark."

"But the posse decided to wait until to-morrow night. They figured that Torres might be lookin' for 'em, and in a pinch he might hurt Mary."

"Let 'em go down to-morrow night," said Sad easily. "I want to be there at daylight in the mornin'."

Swede looked curiously at Sad, who was rolling a fresh cigarette.

"Sad, do you honestly and truly think Mary is at the Torres rancho?"

"Do yuh think I'd be ridin' down there in the dark, in my condition, if I didn't?"

Swede shook his head slowly. "It must be the sun," he said, and went down to help Lonnie saddle the grey.

CHAPTER IX

THE Torres rancho had at one time been a Mexican settlement. Some of the buildings had fallen down, others were in bad repair. There were more buildings than Torres needed, so he occupied the largest, fronting on a little plaza. The architecture was entirely Mexican, weathered to many colours, and more picturesque than any group conceived by modern architects.

There were many old live oaks and sycamores. North of the ranch-houses was another long adobe, which at one time was used as a barracks for soldiers. It had a belfry and an old Spanish bell, which made it look like the ruins of a mission.

Here Pancho Torres reigned supreme, with the assistance of Rojas Gurrero and Porfiro Rodriguez, who in turn were assisted by several Indian mozos. There were no women at the Torres rancho.

The morning after Mary Blain had disappeared, Pancho Torres sat in his private patio, smoking a cigarette and watching Gurrero and Rodriguez schooling a pair of young game-cocks. Next to himself, Torres loved game-cocks. At one time Torres had aspired to be a *torero*. He did well enough, until he took his eyes off the bull to look at a pretty girl in the audience. That lapse cured Torres, because the bull had a single-track mind.

So Torres acquired this rancho, grew fat, raised calves and fought game-cocks. Just now the two young cocks went into a mêlée, in which feathers flew. One of them uttered a hoarse squawk and fled ignominiously.

"*Cobarde!*" snorted Torres disgustedly, as he jerked out a gun and swung it towards the running rooster.

"*Buenas noches!*" yelled Gurrero and rolled out of the line of fire.

The frightened rooster reached the open gateway, and just as Torres fired, there appeared a mozo, dressed only in sort of a long cotton shirt and the hempen sandals of Mexico.

The bullet missed the rooster by three feet, hit the dirt about six feet in front of the young Yaquik and showered him with gravel. With his eyes, nose and mouth filled with gravel, he fell on his knees in an attitude of supplication.

"I damn near heet sometheeng, anyway," said Torres solemnly.

The mozo got to his feet, blinking painfully.

"W'at you want, beside anytheeng else, Indio?" asked Torres.

It appeared that the mozo merely wished to announce that a certain man was at the rancho and desired an audience. Torres ordered the man brought in, and it happened to be an old Mexican from Sharps City. His message to Torres was that Mary Blain had been kidnapped, and that a lot of armed men would be at the rancho some time that night to rescue the girl and hang everybody on the rancho. Torres considered the news calmly, gave the old Mexican several pieces of silver and told him to go home.

"What is to be done?" asked Rodriguez in Spanish.

"Consider that rooster, which fled," replied Torres.

"That is good," replied Gurrero. "We shall not be here."

Another half-clad mozo came trotting into the

patio, breathing heavily. Three riders were approaching the rancho — three American vaqueros. Torres gave him a sharp order and he ran out. A few moments later four Yaqui Indians were concealed in spots where they could cover the patio with their rifles. And the average Yaqui is a dead shot.

No one attempted to stop Sad, Swede and Lonnie. Since before daylight they had been on the hill, watching the rancho. They had seen the Mexican arrive from Sharps City. Lonnie knew the man, and Sad was certain that he had carried a warning to Torres.

They all knew it would be dangerous to ride in on the Mexican, but Sad said it was the best and only thing to do. So they rode past the old buildings and dismounted at the front door of the biggest building. Lonnie had been there several times.

A mozo met them at the door. Lonnie spoke in Spanish, and the mozo led them out to the patio where Torres and his two men were seated, smoking. Sad knew that the stage was all set for them, and that a bad move might be disastrous.

"*Buenos días,*" smiled Torres. "Ah! The yo'ng Señor Welch, eh?"

"*Buenos días, amigo,*" said Lonnie calmly.

"Theese ees w'at you call surprise veesit, no?" said Torres.

"Like the one you made to the Circle A ranch," said Sad. His eyes swept the balcony and the windows. "You can tell yore gunmen to relax, Torres," he went on. "We did not come down here to quarrel or fight."

Torres shrugged his shoulders. "One mus' be prepar'. But my men are not queek to mak' trouble, Señor. Eef you come as friend, we meet you as friend."

"Good," said Sad. "Torres, we came down here to find Mary Blain. I believe a Mexican came from Sharps City this mornin' to tell you that a lot of men are comin' down here to-night. We don't believe in bloodshed; and there will be plenty to-night, if they find you here."

Torres' lips twisted angrily for a moment.

"Eet ees ver' kind of you, my friend, to warn me of these theengs; but Señorita Blain ees not 'ere."

"No?"

"No! You theenk I lie to you?"

"No, I do not think you lie, Torres. But I'll tell yuh this much; if I don't find Mary Blain and take her back with me, there will be fifty armed men down here to-night—and they'll find her. Take yore choice, Torres."

Torres got to his feet, blazing with anger.

"*Madre de Dios!* You spik words I do not onnerstan'! *Por Dios*, 'ow can I geeve you w'at I do not 'ave? Are you crazee? Feefty arm' men. W'at do I care? One or feefty. I tell you, I 'ave not seen theese girl. I might lie to weemen—but I never lie *about* one."

Sad laughed softly. "Torres, I did not come here to make you mad. You have enough guns around here to blow us out of the patio. Anyway, it ain't a question of fightin'. You say Mary Blain is not here; I say she is. Now, there's only one way to prove which is wrong, and that is to make a search."

"Search? But I tell you, she ees not 'ere. W'y search?"

"Torres, if fifty men come here and find Mary Blain on this rancho, even if you are gone, you 'll be a despised outlaw all yore life. The world hates a kidnapper. You'll pay with a rope around yore neck—guilty or not."

"Guilty or not," repeated Torres, a little mysti-

fied. "Eef they find Señorita Blain 'ere, I am guilty, eh ? Eef not—well, how can sometheeng be found w'ere eet ees not ?"

"Let's find her, Torres," suggested Sad. "No, I'm not loco. I'm yore friend. They say you murdered this girl's father and that you robbed the stage and tried to murder Lonnie Welch. Do you want them to always believe this ? Yore business is raisin' cattle, and yore market is across the border. Do you want that market cut off ? All the denials on earth won't ever make the folks of Shell Valley believe yo're innocent ; it's got to be proved."

"Proved ? *Si*, but 'ow ? I can prove notheeng myself."

"Will you help me search this rancho, Torres ? I came down to Shell Valley to prove who killed Frank Ames and Hickory Flynn. I've got to have yore help now. If you don't want to help us, give us permission to make the search. Let yore men guide us."

Torres turned to Gurrero.

"Summon the men," he ordered in Spanish. "Tell them to be on guard." He turned to Sad, "I weel guide you myself personally."

They walked out to the plaza. Sad noticed that there was a lookout in the tower atop the main building. Torres was taking no chances of being caught off his guard. Torres smiled at Sad.

"That ees w'at you maybe call life eensurance, eh ?"

"Oh, I don't blame yuh," replied Sad.

"Now," said Torres, with a gesture of his arm, "w'ere do we search ?"

Sad studied the old buildings for several moments.

"Suppose we start on the ones farther out. How about that old adobe out there that looks like a barracks, or a mission."

"That ees never used," said Torres. "Some has fallen een, and the roof ees ver' bad."

"That's a good place to start."

"*Bueno.*"

"Looks like a wild-goose chase to me," said Swede. "I believe Torres, when he says she ain't here."

"*Gracias,*" smiled Torres. "But theese tall one ees mad-man, I'm theenk."

"I'll tell yuh, he is," agreed Swede. Lonnie said nothing, but he had little heart in the search.

They came to the old adobe. The windows were all gone, some of the doors hanging askew, and there were huge holes in the roof, where the heavy tiles had fallen through.

"You can see for yourselves," said Gurrero, "that theese ees no place from hiding."

Sad went into the old place and the others followed in sort of a half-hearted manner. Dust was deep on the floor. About two-thirds of the way back was a breach in the rear wall, and at this breach were tracks in the dust. Sad hurried ahead, twisted his way through an arched doorway that was partly broken down.

And there he found Mary Blain, roped and gagged, lying against a pile of old rubble. A sharp knife in Sad's hand quickly cut away the gag and ropes, and Lonnie took her in his arms. She cried from the pain of returning circulation, as they carried her outside the old building, and Lonnie cried with her.

Torres, Gurrero and Rodriguez said nothing. In fact, they did nothing, except get in everybody's way. Torres was like a man having a queer dream. Sad saw him kicking himself on the ankle, an amazed expression on his fat face, across which he had drawn a dusty hand, giving himself a peculiarly smutty appearance.

"Eef I am not crezy, I am damn liar, and that's all I hope," said Gurrero.

"The same to you," nodded Rodriguez.

Sad, Swede and Lonnie were too busy rubbing Mary's wrists and ankles to bother about the Mexicans.

"Oh, I'm all right now," said Mary wearily. "I—I didn't expect to ever see any of you again."

"Did yuh know where yuh was, Mary?" asked Lonnie.

Mary looked at Torres steadily. "Why, yes, I knew," she replied. "I have seen this place before."

"Señorita, w'y do you look at me?" queried Torres.

Mary turned her head and looked at Sad. Mary was too wise to say what she was thinking. She had noticed that Torres and his men were armed.

"Oh, I thought they had killed you!" she exclaimed. "I saw you falling with your horse, and that awful brown mare bolted. She has a cold jaw, and I couldn't hold her. But two masked men roped her, and then they roped me. They blindfolded me and one man stayed with me. They did not talk. Then they took me away to some place, where we waited until dark, and then we came down here. I think that only the two men came."

"What did they talk about?" asked Sad.

She looked at Sad for a moment and shook her head.

"Don't be afraid, Mary," he said. "Tell us what they said."

"They spoke Spanish, and one of them said Torres would pay them well for this job. One of them mentioned about Torres killing my father."

Torres and Sad looked intently at each other, but neither of them made any comments.

"Eef the Señorita weel accept my poor 'ospitality, I weel 'ave the cook——"

"Mary, you must be starved!" exclaimed Lonnie. "Nothing to eat since breakfast yesterday."

"I'm so happy now, I've forgotten hunger," replied Mary.

"*Avanzar!*" ordered Torres. "Gurrero! Shake theese short leg from you and tell cook 'ave plenty *comida*."

The bandy-legged Mexican ran as swiftly as his short legs could carry him towards the main building, while the rest of them came slowly. Mary was in no shape to hurry. Torres drew Sad aside.

"*Amigo*, theese ees like damn bad dream," he declared. "One times een Mexico Ceety, I see a *mago* pull leetle w'ite rabeet from my sombrero. *Por Dios*, that was good. But theese theeng you do——"

"I am not a magician, Torres," said Sad.

Torres rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Then he shook his head, as though baffled.

"The Señorita say that man say Torres weel pay well, eh? For w'at? I like weemen. *Por Dios*, Torres does not need for steal weemen! I guess I go crazy een my *cabenza*, eh?"

"I don't blame yuh. But think what would have happened to you if all them men came down here to-night, captured you and found her in that old building."

Torres drew a deep breath.

"*Gracias, amigo!*" he exclaimed softly. "My brain speen 'round like a wheel, but that ees some-theeng I know damn well."

They went back to the patio, where Torres brought out an easy chair for Mary. The whole situation was beyond her comprehension. There

was no doubt in her mind that Torres or his men had kidnapped her. And here was Sad, Swede and Lonnie acting in a friendly manner with Torres. She didn't know whether to cry, get mad, or what to do. Lonnie kept telling her that everything was all right; that Sad Sontag, like the Marines, had landed and had the situation well in hand. Although Lonnie did not know just how or why certain things had happened, he was seeing the world in much different colours now.

Swede listened, cuffed his hat from one side of his head to the other and looked indignantly at Sad. At least, he thought, this long-geared partner of his might explain something. But that was like Sad. How did he know Mary Blain was on this rancho? wondered Swede. How did he know just where to make the search?

Torres also looked upon Sad with a bit of awe.

"Theese jeeger know sometheeng, eh, Rojas?" said Rodriguez to the diminutive Gurrero, as they lounged at the gateway, wondering what would happen next.

"I'll bet your damn life," agreed Gurrero. "Never biffore 'ave I see so much brain een my head. Torres don' know w'at from theenkeeng."

"Who put theese girl een that ol' shed, eh?"

"Sure," nodded Gurrero. "And there she ees."

Torres ordered them to bring a table to the patio, and the cook brought out the food. There was little service or style at the Torres rancho, but there was unlimited food.

"Mary, you're wonderin' what it is all about," whispered Lonnie. "I can't tell you. Sad is the only one who knows. He knew where to find you. Don't be afraid, it will all work out."

After the meal was finished Sad drew Torres aside

and they walked out to the little plaza, where they sat down.

"Torres, do you believe I'm yore friend?" asked Sad.

"*Amigo*," replied Torres seriously, "theese ees serious business. I only talk one time weeth you biffore. To-day you come 'ere, after I 'ave been warn' that men were come to keel me. You act loco. Then I help you fin' that girl, who ees not on theese rancho—but you fin' her. For this I would be hung. Eef I did not theenk you were my friend, I would have keeled all of you, when we find that girl, biccause dead people do not talk."

"Good," said Sad. "You've got the right idea. Listen close to what I'm askin' yuh to do."

And after thirty minutes of arguments, Torres agreed.

"*Amigo*," he said, "I'm 'ave no nine lives like a damn cat. But I am weelin' to trus' my one to you. *Esta bueno*."

CHAPTER X

TINY TOTTEN and Jim Orval rode out to the Circle A that morning, and Mrs. Miner told them about Sad coming back to the ranch the night before. She didn't know many of the details of Sad's escape in the hills; but she did know he came back all skinned up. No, he didn't say that he had any idea who had tried to kill him. She told them that Sad, Swede and Lonnie had left the ranch late in the night, but they did not tell her where they were going. Presumably in search of Mary.

" You don't suppose they took the bull by the horns and went into Mexico, do yuh ? " asked Orval, as they rode back to town.

" No, I don't," repl ed Tiny. " There's only three of 'em ; and they knowed we was goin' down in force to-night. No, I don't believe they'd go down there. They'll be showin' up."

The sheriff did not like the idea of the invasion. In fact, he ordered Tiny to stay out of Mexico, and Tiny told him where he could go for the rest of his life.

" You can't bring prisoners back with yuh, Orval," said the sheriff. " That's kidnappin'."

" We won't bring no prisoners," retorted Orval. " If we find Mary Blain down there, we'll bring her back, of course ; but any Mexicans we find at Torres' rancho will stay there—hangin' on a tree."

" And if yuh don't find her down there ? " queried the sheriff.

" We'll stop Torres and his bunch from raidin' across the line any more."

"Well," said the sheriff resignedly, "you fellers are all of age."

He talked with Bill Young, who brought seven cowboys with him.

"No, I'll tell yuh about me," said Bill. "If we don't find that girl down there at the rancho, there won't be any hangin' done by my gang. Torres may be guilty as hell, but it ain't never been proved."

Lynn French and his six men didn't know what they'd do.

"It all depends," said Lynn. "I ain't got anythin' personal against Torres; but this raidin' and murderin' has got to stop. We ain't got no legal right across the border. We've got no come back for anythin' that happens to us down there. My opinion is that Torres will know we're comin'. If he does, he'll either run or fight. Personally, I hope he runs. Mostly Yaquis workin' for him, and they can shoot—even in the dark."

Frank Ames, partly sober, wanted to go along.

"I'm takin' him," Tiny told the sheriff.

"You don't want that drunken bum along, Tiny. He'll be a detriment to yuh."

"If he don't come back, he won't be."

"Do yuh look for a fight?"

"No. I'll make yuh a bet right now that Torres knows we're comin'. He's no fool. If he's got Mary Blain, we won't find her."

"Then why go down there?"

"Because we're a lot of damn fool white men—that's why."

It was just before dark when Sad, Swede and Lonnie came to Sharps City. Their coming swelled the ranks of the posse to twenty men. Sad told Tiny that they had been out in the hills, trying to find some clue as to who had tried to kill them.

Three of the cowboys carried lanterns tied to the

saddles, and all, except Frank Ames and the three cowboys from the Circle A, carried rifles. Jim Orval assumed leadership, and as soon as it was dark, they rode silently out of town.

There was an old road from Sharps City, leading down into Mexico, and they followed it for a mile or more across the border, where Orval led them over an old trail. It was very dark down there. The posse did not talk, and only the creak of saddle leather and the soft thud of many hoofs told of their coming.

On the slope of a long hill they drew up. There were no lights at the Torres rancho.

"I don't like that," said Lynn French softly. "Should be some lights. What's yore plan, Orval?"

"Do yuh suppose somebody warned them?" asked Orval.

"Of course they did," answered Tiny. "I've told yuh plenty times to-day that some Mexican would pack word to Torres."

"Which means," said Bill Young, "that they've either pulled out, or they'll try to dry-gulch us down there in the dark."

"If anybody is scared, this is a good place to drop out," stated Orval. "I'm goin' on, if I have to go alone."

"Nobody droppin' out," growled Tiny. "If you think yo're goin' to be a lone hero, yo're all wrong, Orval."

"There's an old road about a quarter of a mile, straight ahead," offered Lonnie. "It runs right into the old plaza."

"All right," grunted Orval. "We might just as well hit 'em head-on, boys. C'mon."

With guns drawn, they rode straight to the plaza, and the front of Torres' ranch-house. Not a soul

was to be seen. It might well have been a ghost-town. Quickly they dismounted. The door was not locked.

"Spooky as hell," whispered Young, as he sent some of his men around to the rear to cover the patio gate.

Sad and Swede were the first ones to enter the house. Some one lighted a lantern, and after a few moments the other three were lighted. Men came in from the patio and the search began. Every one felt that Torres and his outfit had simply headed out for a safer place.

No doors had been locked against them, nothing removed.

"Don't touch a thing," ordered Orval. "We're not raiders."

Some of the men wanted to quit the search. To them it was a waste of time.

"If Torres was warned, would he leave Mary Blain here for us to find?" asked one of French's cowboys. "You fellers all know damn well he wouldn't."

They met in the patio to discuss things. French wanted an opinion from Sad Sontag.

"In my opinion, we might as well go home," replied Sad. "I didn't want to come down here, in the first place. As a matter of fact, I don't believe Torres kidnapped her."

"I expected yuh to say that," remarked Orval. "I told the sheriff that you and Torres was pretty thick. I ain't forgot that little incident at the Circle A."

"Nobody ever asked yuh to forget it," replied Sad evenly.

"Well, what's to be done?" queried Lynn French. "Let's do one thing or the other. No use arguin' here."

"I'll tell yuh what let's do," suggested Ocoteo. "There's that old buildin' out there, this side of the dry wash. The one that looks like a mission. Let's take a look at that."

"That damn old thing is all fallen in," said a cowboy.

"I think Ocoteo is right," said Orval. "Let's take a look."

Muttering over the futility of such a move, the posse walked over there.

"We're in a swell way to git mowed down," said Tiny. "Walkin' in a bunch, carryin' three lanterns."

"I know my feet are damn sore," complained Frank Ames. "Why in hell didn't somebody bring some liquor?"

But nobody paid any attention to him. They reached the old building and went inside, holding their lanterns high

"This damn old thing is liable to fall down on us," said a cowboy. "Don't bump into any walls."

Orval, Sad and Tiny carried the lanterns. Orval went straight to the sagging, arched doorway, and the rest began worming their way through. Orval held his lantern high, Sad close behind him. Orval grunted softly, turned and searched the faces of those who had entered the room. Across one corner of the big room was a huge pile of poles, old lumber and other debris.

"Orval, I thought you'd be surprised," said Sad. Orval turned quickly.

"What do yuh mean?" he asked harshly.

"At not findin' Mary Blain here."

"I don't know what yuh mean."

Sad laughed at him, holding his lantern up to illuminate Orval's face.

"The game is played out, Orval," he said, "and

yore last white chip is gone. I called you Orval, but yore name is Jack Ferris."

Smack! Ocoteo went down in a limp heap, almost knocking the lantern from Tiny's hand. Swede had hit him over the head with his six-shooter, and as Ocoteo fell his gun dropped from a nerveless hand.

"Hold still, Felts!" snapped Lonnie. "You too, Daley! I'm behind you both. Keep yore hands above yore belts."

"What in God's name?" choked Orval. "Why, I—what's this all about?"

"We got Mary Blain here this afternoon," said Sad. "She's safe at home. You brought her here—you or yore men, Orval; brought her here in the dead of night, knowin' that Torres would not find her. You led us here to-night, expecting' to find her and cinch the evidence on Torres. You wanted to hang innocent men to cover yore own deviltry."

"That's a lie! Damn you, there's not a word of truth in it."

"Yore name is Jack Ferris. You murdered Henry Ames and Hickory Flynn, to keep them from recognisin' you. You didn't know they were here, when you bought the Three Slash from Bud Blain. You murdered Bud Blain for the money you paid him, and you caved in the roof of an old tunnel to hide the corpse."

Orval's face was the colour of wood ashes. There was no use for him to deny anything now. The crowd blocked him from the only exit

"Yore men staged a hold-up on the grades, too," said Sad "I reckon yore idea was to kill Lonnie Welch, wasn't it? To you, everythin' is fair in love or war. And you shore tried to mop up on me yesterday. You pore fools, you ran me into that tunnel, where I found the corpse of Bud Blain. Orval, I've got yuh where the hair is short."

Frank Ames, whitefaced, looked at Sad.

" Maybe he killed Leslie too," quavered Frank.

" He did not ! " snapped Sad. " You murdered him yourself ! "

Ames nearly collapsed.

" Why would he murder Leslie ? " asked French hoarsely.

" Because this man ain't Frank Ames. Leslie framed a deal to steal the Circle A. I reckon Orval was in on that, too. Anyway, I made a deal to buy the Circle A from this man for five thousand. It was so much more than he was bein' paid that he fell for it. Leslie, in the next room, heard the deal, and decided to take this man back to Mesa. But this man wanted that big money ; so he murdered Leslie and came back to collect."

The pseudo Frank Ames, his nerves completely wrecked, fell on his knees, clawing at his head. For an instant all eyes were on this grovelling wreck, and in that instant Orval sprang behind Sad, drawing a gun from inside his shirt. Sad's body blocked him from the startled crowd.

" Drop that gun, Lonnie ! " he snarled. " Damn yuh, don't draw—none of yuh. I'll shoot Sontag, if yuh make one crooked move. My life ain't worth anythin' now. Move over to the left. Git away from that door. I'm goin' out, damn yuh ! I wasn't born to be hung."

Spang ! The lantern in Tiny's hand was smashed.

Whang ! The report of the next shot was deafening. Orval staggered back, dropping his gun, and the next moment Sad whirled, wrapped both arms around Orval and crashed with him to the floor.

" Well, shear me for a sheep ! " yelped a cowboy. " Look ! "

Standing behind that long pile of debris across

one corner of the room were nine men. Pancho Torres, Rojas Gurrero, Porfiro Rodriguez and six Yaqui Indians, with rifles in their hands. One of them had smashed Orval's right arm. Guerrro was barely able to peer over the top of the rubbish.

"*Buenas noches, amigos,*" said Torres. "Theese ees rilly a surprise."

"Good shootin', pardner," panted Sad. "This *hombre* might have been *mucho malo.* Didja bring the ropes?"

"*Mucha soga,*" laughed Torres, producing many lengths of maguey ropes.

The captives were quickly tied. Orval snarled like a mad dog, but refused to talk any more. Ocoteo was still out from the blow on his head. Felts, the most intelligent of Orval's cowboys, asked if there would be anything in it for him to confess.

"It might relieve yore soul," replied Sad.

"I'll keep still, if tha's all I git."

They all trooped back to Torres' house, where the candles were lighted. The thing had shocked most of the men. They had respected Orval and believed him on the square.

"Sad," said Tiny, "will yuh answer me one question?"

"If I can—yes, Tiny."

"What was it yuh seen in that picture at the Circle A? The one with Old Hickory and his prisoner?"

Orval was sitting there in a chair, with only his feet bound. Sad walked around in front of him and pointed at Orval's left hand. The little finger was off at the middle joint, and on the third finger was a broad silver ring, the seal carved in the form of a horseshoe.

"Through that magnifyin' glass, yuh can see it plain," said Sad. "And I was sure no two men

would have half a finger missin' and wearin' that kind of a ring. I suppose he wore the ring for luck."

Torres walked over to Sad and held out his hand.

"Spiking of luck," said Torres seriously, "I am glad to 'ave met you. To-day I'm saying you are crazee man. *Por Dios*, I weesh I am crazee like you, *Amigo*. To you belong my damn life. Weethout you, right now I am dead like hell, or weethout honour. To you, one half of theese rancho belong now. You 'ear, everybodee? Theese crazee man ees w'at you call par'ner to me now."

Sad smiled at him, as he replied:

"No, Torres. I appreciate it, but I was hired to do this job, and you was part of it. *I* may need a friend some day."

"You 'ave one every day," said Torres. "Until," Torres smiled softly, "some damn liar get me keeled off."

Tiny shook his head. "Damned if I know yet how he found out all these things. None of the rest of us found out anythin'."

"You was lookin' in the wrong place," said Sad, as he went over to the snivelling pseudo Frank Ames.

"What did Leslie tell yuh about the real Frank Ames?" asked Sad.

"He—he said he was killed on a train in Wyomin'," choked the sufferer. "Damn him, he was to pay me five hundred."

Sad nodded and turned to the men.

"I reckon Mary gets both ranches," he said, turning to Lonnie.

"Get goin', Kid," he said softly. "She'll be waitin' to know."

Lonnie pawed at Sad's arm, trying to shake his hand. For some reason he did not seem able to say anything.

"That'll keep, Lonnie," smiled Sad. "Ride fast, boy; it'll take a long time to tell it all."

Torres' men helped rope the prisoners to their saddles. Ocoteo knew that something awful had happened, but he suffered in silence. A few minutes later there was only Torres, Gurrero and Rodriguez standing in the doorway of the ranch-house.

"Theese ees all clir, like damn mod to me," said Gurrero.

"Jus' like I am," agreed Rodriguez.

"Don' you onnerstand notheeng," asked Torres disgustedly. "Theese man they calling Sontag, hees ver' smart. Hees prov' we do not keel somebody, nor rob somebody. That ees plenty for you to know. He ees my compadre; my ver' bes' *amigo*."

"Ees theese w'at I'm onnerstand?" asked Rodriguez. "Does theese man prov' we never keel nobody nor rob nobody?"

"*Por Dios*, w'at you theenk theese man ees? Hees onlee been 'ere a leetle w'ile. You can' expect too damn much. Geeve heem time."

There were plenty lights at the Torres rancho, as the cavalcade wound along the brushy slope of the hill, going back to Sharps City.

"I shiver when I think of them Yaqui Indians and their rifles," said Bill Young. "What suckers they'd have made of us, if Sontag hadn't been there first and had things set?"

"Why emphasise the Yaquis?" asked Tiny. "We was suckers long before we entered Mexico. Ain't that right, Orval?"

But it was a trivial question to ask a man who was thinking as deeply as Orval, and no answer was expected. Up at the head of the procession rode Sad and Swede, knee to knee. Sad turned and looked back toward the twinkling lights of the rancho.

"It was horseshoe luck, Swede," Sad said, "the horseshoe on Orval's finger."

"Where didja find the luck first, Tall Feller?" asked Swede.

"Oh, I jist picked it up, when Orval wanted to bet that Mary was at the Torres rancho. I seen it shinin' in the light."

"Call it luck if yuh want to, Sad. I was there, and I didn't see it shinin'. There's the lights of Sharps City ahead."

And they went on slowly, because there was no hurry nor danger now. The Mexican invasion had been a success.

THE END

FLIMSY EVIDENCE

CHAPTER I

SHORTY WOODS was worried, angry and in pain. He was propped up in a hotel bed, badly in need of a shave, scowling at the chambermaid who was tidying up the place. A daily newspaper was scattered over the bed, along with cigarette ashes, a notebook and a pencil with a broken point.

"Ye don't need to be yelpin' at me," reminded the maid, without looking at Shorty. "Ye wouldn't go to no horspital and ye won't have no nurse. It seems to me that whin anny one gets shot twice through their limbs——"

"Legs!" roared Shorty. "I'm no tree."

"The doctor said that if ye got violent I was to send wor-rd and he'd——"

"Listen to me, will you?" wailed Shorty. "All I want is a knife."

"To finish the job, by anny chance?"

"To sharpen a pencil!"

"Oh!" The maid, who was maid in occupation only, turned and looked him over severely. "I dunno," she said. "Crazy people are allus lookin' for a chance to——"

"Wait a minute," begged Shorty calmly. "Bring me my small valise out of that closet. Ask me what I want and I'll tell you I want my six-shooter. Who do I want to shoot? You'd be surprised and pained."

"Ye're delerious, man."

"Delerious, hell! Bring me that Gideon Bible over there, and I'll swear on it to my absolute sanity—before I shoot you."

"What's all the shootin' about?" inquired a voice at the doorway.

Shorty craned around so far as his injuries would permit, which was sufficient for him to gaze upon two men—cowboys in store clothes, except for the high-heel boots and big Stetson hats; cowboys who grinned upon him in his distress.

One of them was so tall he had to stoop to pass through the doorway. His long, lean face was twisted in a smile as he rubbed his chin with the ball of his left thumb. The other man was shorter, heavier, with a grin-wrinkled face and wide, inquiring blue eyes. Both were as bronzed as a white man may get in Arizona.

Shorty stared at them for perhaps a dozen seconds. That is, he stared between blinks of his eyelids.

"You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" asked the tall one.

"Sufferin' Christmas!" snorted the injured man. "Hashknife Hartley, is that you, or am I seein' things?"

"You never was in your right mind," said the short one.

"Sleepy Stevens, you——!" Shorty hammered on the bedclothes. "C'mere, you couple of—— Well, dang my sister's black cat's uncle!"

The two cowboys shook hands seriously with Shorty, who turned to the maid.

"Get out of here, will you?" he asked. "You stick around here and you'll prob'ly hear somethin' that would make you blush."

"Not after lookin' after your room for three days, I wouldn't," she retorted, and went out, carrying a bundle of dirty linen.

"There's a lady for you," sighed Shorty.

"Not for me," replied Sleepy.

"Take it or leave it." Shorty grinned. "But

what I want to know is how in hell you two ever found me here?"

"Well, I'll tell you," replied Sleepy. "Down at a pool room, a feller told us that a damn fool by the name of Shorty Woods got shot three days ago and was bein' kept alive in this hotel."

"Might have been another Shorty Woods."

"Mebbe it runs in the family," Hashknife smiled.

"What runs in the family?"

"Bein' a damn fool. But outside of that, what are you doin' down here in Arizona, and what have you been doin' since we seen you last?"

"Wait a minute," said Shorty. "What was I a-doin' when you seen me last?"

"You was a detective on the Seattle police force. That was about five years ago."

"Wrong again, Hashknife; it was seven years ago—the last year I was with the police. It took 'em three years to discover that I didn't know anythin'. Anyway, it wasn't a good job. After I quit there, I went back on the eastern Oregon range for a year or so. Bossed an outfit for a while, but they was losin' money all the time. Eastern layout. Sold out and left me without a job.

"But about that time I got in with Bradley & Jones, Kansas City, as a buyer. Ever since then I've been buyin' stuff for 'em all over the north-west. They're a good outfit, but you deliver or quit. Well, I delivered all right, and when they had trouble with their buyer down here, they transferred me. I understand that their former buyer played a crooked game down here.

"Anyway, the firm got out cards to all the cattlemen in these parts, sayin' that Shorty Woods would be along soon to buy their little dogies, and down I came, follerin' the cards. The hell of it is, I've got to pick up an extra shipment at Rincon right away

—and me with two bullets in the legs. In one leg, to be exact."

"Don't your firm know you've been shot?" asked Hashknife.

"Listen, pardner," said Shorty, "if I sent them a wire sayin' I had been shot, it would take twelve Senators and a couple of Congressmen to prove to their satisfaction that I was innocent. Even if I could prove that I really have been shot, they'd say I got drunk and accidentally shot myself. And here's the worst of it, Hashknife: I'm engaged to be married as soon as this trip is over. No job, no bride. Now can you see what I'm up against?"

"You always was a pretty fair drinker," reminded Sleepy.

"And they know it, Sleepy."

"Outside of that, how did you get shot?" queried Hashknife.

"Absolutely no reason for it," declared Shorty. "I don't know a soul here in Tucson—not a soul. I got here in town, and there was a message from the firm sayin' for me to wait for a feller from Rincon; a seller, I reckon. He was to meet me at this hotel——"

Shorty paused and smiled painfully.

"Well, I went out to see what the town looked like, and I had a few drinks here and there. No, I didn't get stricken—jist exhilarated. This kept up until about ten o'clock that evenin', when I decided to come back and go to bed. I'm on my way back, kinda hummin' a tune—you know how I mean."

"No," replied Hashknife gravely. "I never drink. But go ahead."

"When did you quit drinkin'?" demanded Shorty.

Hashknife looked at his watch carefully.

"It was about half-past three," offered Sleepy. "A few minutes either way won't make no difference. Go ahead, Shorty. I'll betcha you wasn't hummin'; you was singin'. Anybody would shoot you."

"No, I wasn't singin'; I was hummin'."

"Let him tell it," advised Hashknife. "If he really had been singin' they'd have shot him higher. Always shoot a hummer in the legs."

"All right," grunted Shorty painfully, as he tried to shift his position. "I was comin' around the corner down there, and the light wasn't very good. I bumped into a man pretty hard and almost fell down, but I grabbed a post and stayed up. I intended to apologise, but he shot me twice before I could open my mouth.

"Man, them bullets shore upset me. I didn't feel 'em at first, but by the time the crowd and the police got there, I shore knowed I'd been hit. They took me to a little hospital and cut my pants off, but they didn't need to do any lead minin' on me, 'cause the bullets went plumb through—both about six inches above the knee. One of 'em almost got the bone.

"After they got me patched up, I insisted on bein' brought here to the hotel. I don't want the firm to know—and what can I do? If I can't get over to Rincon and buy them cows, I'm sunk. Oh, yeah, there was a telegram from the feller I was to meet. He couldn't get over here, but he wants me right away."

Shorty had the folded telegram in his notebook. It had been sent from Rincon, Arizona.

SORRY AM UNABLE TO MEET YOU IN TUCSON STOP HAVE NOTIFIED YOUR FIRM I CAN FILL THAT SPECIAL ORDER STOP COME AND GET THEM—R. E. RENTON—RINCON.

"As I understand it," explained Shorty, "this Renton is the big cowman of that range and owns the Flyin' V brand."

"You never met Renton, eh?" said Hashknife.

"Wouldn't know him from a fresh hide," declared Shorty.

"How long are you goin' to be on the shelf?"

"The doctor wasn't sure—but long enough to lose my job. And"—Shorty sighed mournfully—"I'll also lose a chance to get married. Hashknife, I've got the sweetest girl in the world. She'll come down from Pendleton the minute I say the word and send the money But if I ain't got no job—aw, hell!"

"Leg hurt you?" asked Sleepy.

"Leg pains ain't so bad."

"If you was able to go over to Rincon and make that deal, how much time could you kill after that before the firm descend upon you, Shorty?" asked Hashknife.

"Enough to let me git on my feet. Why, I could stall a lot You can always do that, except in a case like this, where the seller has told the firm his stuff is ready and waitin' for the buyer. I'm stuck."

"Are you goin' to quit drinkin' when you get married?"

"I shore am. After I'm married, I can't take a chance on losin' my job. If you could see that little girl——"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Sleepy. "Shorty, you ain't marryin' no *girl*, are you?"

"Well," confessed Shorty, "she's thirty-four. But you'd never guess it. I'm only forty."

"Thirty-four is all right for you," said Sleepy, "even if you'd never guess it. And if you can love her, shave every day, quit drinkin', quit playin' poker and stay home nights—I'd say marry her by all means, because you need a keeper."

"Aw, what do you know about love and marriage?"

"Well, I'm still single, ain't I? And the girls I've had!"

"Sleepy"—Hashknife laughed—"is jist like a little typhoid germ that's lost its punch. He jist hops from one to another, but never takes."

Shorty's laugh was followed with a deep sigh.

"It's shore been wonderful to find you boys here. I don't know of any two fellers I'd rather meet any place. But I can't hardly laugh. No, it ain't the two holes in my legs—it's that job and the girl."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Shorty," said Hashknife seriously. "I never like to see an unhappy cowboy, even if he's an ex-cowboy. If you want to take the chance, I'll go down to Rincon, play that I'm Shorty Woods long enough to put over that deal. They don't know either of us in Rincon—and I've bought plenty cows before."

"My Gawd, would you do that?" blurted Shorty. "You ain't jokin'?"

"If you're willin' to take that chance."

"That's no chance, and it would shore mean a lot to me. Are you shore you ain't jokin' me, Hashknife?"

"I never joke with cripples. But, Shorty, do you know of any reason why somebody should shoot you?"

"Hell, no! It was either a mistake, or the other feller was crazy. Why, I never even seen what he looked like, and the police never saw him. I figure he was lookin' for somebody about my size, and when I bumped into him he jist let fly at me a couple times."

"All right. Sleepy, you go down to the depot and buy a couple tickets to Rincon. Find out when we

leave, and while you're gone I'll get all the dope from Shorty."

"Let me pay for the tickets," said Shorty. "That's the least I can do."

"After we buy and ship them cows." Hashknife laughed.

"Aw, I know you'll do it, Hashknife. I've never known you to start to do anythin' and fail on the job. I got plenty expense money."

"All right. And as soon as that deal is finished, we'll come back here and give you back your credentials."

"That's great. Now if Sleepy will git his grinnin' face out of here, I'll settle down and give you all the dope on Shorty Woods' job."

CHAPTER II

JERKY GILLIS was nearly seven feet tall and built like a slat. His face was long and serious, etched with the lines of sixty or more summers, which he admitted, and some he had possibly overlooked. Jerky had been a Texas Ranger, mule skinner, trail herder, and was yet one of the best cowboys in the country. His eyes, seldom discernible under his beetling brows, were a faded blue. His nose was long. That is, it had originally been long, but several breaks had kinked it badly.

Smoky Hill, christened Gerald, was barely twenty, and just six months removed from Pittsburgh. Smoky was a clean looking youngster, addicted to fancy cowboy clothes, a pearl-handled gun and the highest heels in the Rincon country.

For a youngster but six months away from a city, Smoky was doing quite well. He and Jerky Gillis had been arrested for stealing a calf, and were now facing their preliminary hearing. Old Judge Evans, a wise old cow country jurist, looked at them over the top of his glasses. The room was comfortably filled with cowboys and cattlemen.

Moose Raney, the half-pint sized sheriff, acting as bailiff, swore Smoky, who took the stand. A murmur of laughter annoyed the judge when Smoky gave his occupation as cowpuncher. He looked severely at the crowd and admonished them softly. Then he asked Smoky to tell his story.

"I don't know where to start, your Honour," said Smoky.

"Start in with the first drink," prompted Jerky.

Smoky flushed as he caught the eye of Uncle Hoddy Hill, his real uncle.

"Well, we got drunk," said Smoky.

"We?" queried the judge.

"Jerky and me. It was the first time I ever got drunk, and I'm just a little hazy over what really did happen. I remember we were out near the loading corral at the railroad, and a calf was bawling. It seems that Jerky and me felt badly about that poor little calf, and Jerky said it was a shame for anybody to take a calf that young away from its mother.

"If I remember rightly we cried about it. And after that we took the calf out of the corral. It seems that we had an idea of finding its mother, but just how we were going to do this I don't know. We both tried to take the calf on our horses—I remember that. My horse threw me off, with the calf in my arms.

"Then we took the calf into a saloon with us. Yes, I remember that much of it. But really, judge,

the rest is too hazy for me to tell you just what did happen."

"What brand was on that calf, Mr. Hill?" asked the judge.

"I'm not sure. Jerky said there were three V's on its hip."

The crowd laughed. It was a Flying V calf—and only one V was in the brand. Smoky was excused, and Jerky sworn. As he sat down he said quickly—

"Jerky Gillis, past sixty, Tumblin' H outfit, cow-puncher."

"You heard Mr. Hill's testimony, Mr. Gillis," said the judge. "Can you add anything?"

"Yeah, I can," replied Jerky seriously. "If I ever find Bob Renton with his head caught, I'll kick his pants up around his neck so danged tight they'll choke him to death."

Bob Renton, owner of the Flying V, sprang to his feet, but the judge crashed his gavel down on the desk-top. Renton hesitated, glared at Jerky and sat down.

"That wasn't what I asked you, Mr. Gillis," said the judge.

"Well, I added it, Judge." Jerky grinned. "And I'll do her, too. If all the dirty dry-gulchers in this country was laid end to end, anybody would recognise him."

"Wait a minute, Jerky!" snorted the sheriff. "This is a court, not a saloon. Confine yourself to answerin' questions. Your personal opinions of the plaintiff don't interest us none."

The judge shuffled some papers, studying them with lowered head. He had a sense of humour, which is not at all becoming—at times. His face was set in grim lines as he looked at Jerky again.

"Mr. Gillis, can you tell us what happened to that Flying V calf?"

"Well, I fell on the damn thing, Judge. You know how it is when a feller gets drunk, Judge. Me and the kid both tried to pack the calf on our horses. He got throwed off, and we had a awful time catchin' the danged calf again. I reckon I was drunker'n Smoky was, 'cause I wasn't able to git on my horse with the calf.

"It was Smoky's idea that we ride close together, him packin' one end of the calf and me packin' the other."

Jerky broke into a gale of hearty laughter.

"You try it sometime, Judge! I dunno what happened, except that I fell off my horse and landed on the calf."

"Did that kill the calf?"

"I dunno, Judge. Mebbe it didn't kill it right away, but I reckon it kinda hurried the calf to its doom. Me and Smoky got the calf, and we was goin' around lookin' for a pul—pul——"

"Pulmotor," said Smoky.

"That was it. But we didn't find any, and then Smoky wanted to make a — a — what was it, Smoky?"

"Blood transfusion," said Smoky.

"I don't know what that was," continued Jerky, "but Smoky said it was the thing to do."

"I have been told that the calf was dead when you dragged it into the Double Eagle Saloon," said the judge.

"Well, I've told you all I know about it," said Jerky.

The judge pencilled a few notations, shading his face with his hand. Finally he lifted his head.

"It seems that the Flying V outfit had a hundred head of calves in the loading pens, ready for ship-

ment to a designated place in Wyoming. It also seems that Jerky Gillis and Smoky Hill, somewhat under the influence of liquor, and with a maudlin intent, did remove one of those calves and attempt to return it to its mother. In the attempt to restore this offspring to its mother, one or both of the defendants in this case fell upon said calf, causing its demise."

The judge lifted his eyes and looked at Bob Renton.

"And now," he said slowly, "both men admit that they did this. It has been brought to my notice that the complainant in this case knew the true facts, but still brought a charge of cattle rustling against the defendants — Oh! By the way, who got the calf?"

"The Flyin' V—Bob Renton—got him, Judge," replied Jerky.

"That's more than he's entitled to!" snapped the judge. "Any man with no more sense of humour, no more sense of proportion than the plaintiff in this case has shown, a dead calf is more than his due. Gentlemen, this case is dismissed.

Bob Renton was angry. Not only had his charges been ruthlessly dismissed, but he had been humiliated in public. Renton considered himself a big man in the Rincon country, and this humiliation was almost more than he could bear.

Renton was not a big man physically. He was of medium height, slender, sharp of features. His hair was grey at the temples, but the rest of it was coal-black. He had calculating greenish grey eyes and a thin-lipped mouth, partly concealed by a small moustache.

Bob Renton was not as popular with the cowboys —even his own—as he might have been. He was inclined to be sarcastic, domineering and superior in every way, which the boys silently resented.

His remarks about the judge were very uncomplimentary as he left the courtroom. Uncle Hoddy Hill and his wife, known to every one as Aunt Abbey, were in front of the building, talking about the trial, as Renton came out.

Uncle Hoddy was a little dried-up man, with badly bowed legs, a hawk-like face lightened by a pair of kindly blue eyes, which smiled out upon a world that had never given him an even break. Aunt Abbey was a tiny grey-haired lady, her face heavily lined, but with a welcoming smile for everybody. She was born on the range, and her vocabulary was of the cattle country.

"The judge must be a friend of yours, Hill," said Renton.

"Not 'specially, Renton. His decision was just."

"Just! Some day I hope to see a decent judge on that bench. And I'm telling you something right now, Hill——"

"Wait a minute!" snapped the old man. "You're not tellin' us anythin'. Not a dern thing. You've given me a dirty deal ever since you bought the Flyin' V, and right now I'm packin' war medicine. You keep the buyers away from me, tryin' to break me. Now, I want you to git what I'm sayin': I'm through listenin' to a coyote like you."

Renton stepped back hastily as the old man faced him, legs braced far apart, right hand, shielded by his coat, grasping something inside the waistband of his pants.

"One move from you and one of us gits blotted out," rasped Uncle Hoddy.

Renton's laugh was shaky.

"I'm no gun fighter," he said.

"You've got a gun in your holster, Renton. Drag it. I want a chance to drill you. Put up or shut up, dang you!"

Renton turned on his heel and walked away. The old man glared after him, apparently in a baffled rage. Then he turned to his wife, who was convulsed with mirth.

"Whatcha laughin' at?" he demanded hotly.

"You, Hoddy."

"Me?" He relaxed curiously. "Why are you laughin' at me, ma?"

"You bluffin' old sinner. What would you have done if Renton had reached for his gun—yanked your shirt out of your pants?"

Uncle Hoddy drew a deep breath, and a smile twisted his old face.

"Well, it worked, ma. Dawgone him, I shore was mad."

"You should have more patience, Hoddy. Job had patience."

"That Bible feller? Oh, yeah. But dang him, he never had to buck the Flyin' V outfit. I tell you, from now on I'm packin' a gun."

"I wish you wouldn't, Hoddy."

"Well, wouldn't you rather have me die with a gun in my hand than with a handful of woollen undershirt and a couple buttons?"

"Well, it would look better. We better be gettin' home. I've got sponge to set, or we won't have no bread to-morrow. I wonder where Smoky went."

"That blamed kid! He'll drive me to drink, I tell you."

"Don't use that for an alibi, Hoddy."

"Well, him and Jerky is goin' to git into serious trouble. Jerky's learnin' him to draw and shoot. Dang Jerky; he thinks you ain't a man until you can shade a second with your first shot."

"Jerky means well, Hoddy."

"Yea-a-ah! Smoky ain't got range brains. A kid like him learnin' to use a six-gun is jist like a

nation that builds up a crack army. They've gotta go out and take a smack at somebody, just to see if they're as good as they think they are."

"Well, never mind Smoky; let's go home."

"I thought you was wonderin' where he was."

"I was, but I never asked for any speech."

Smoky had gone to the sheriff's office after the hearing, and the sheriff had returned his gun. Moose, in spite of his size, was a capable officer, hard as the desert hills, but he had a sense of humour.

"If I was you, Smoky, I'd saw the barrel off this gun and throw the handle-end into the creek."

"That gun cost me forty dollars," replied Smoky.

"I know it did. But if you ain't careful it'll cost you a lot more than that. You're young, Smoky, and you're a tenderfoot. You ain't got enough *sabe* of things to keep your horns pinned back. Take my advice—Let whisky and six-guns alone."

"I'm through with whisky," said Smoky wryly. "That's bad stuff. But I'm not going to hang up my gun. Renton says this range isn't big enough for both outfits. I tell you, he's almost broke Uncle Hoddy. Before Renton came here uncle sold all his stuff to Bradley & Jones. But after Renton came in here, the buyer quit seeing Uncle Hoddy. He told me all about it and I wrote a letter to Bradley & Jones, telling them just what their buyer was doing here.

"Uncle Hoddy didn't want to sign the letter, but he finally did. That was over a month ago. Then we got a letter from that firm, saying that things were being investigated. In my letter I said that Renton cut his prices far below the market. Uncle Hoddy said I couldn't prove it, and I guess I couldn't. But, anyway, the other day we got a card from Bradley & Jones, saying that a new buyer

by the name of Shorty Woods would be along soon. A new man might give Uncle Hoddy a chance, you see."

The sheriff smiled slowly.

"I hope so," he said. "In the meantime, don't get an itchin' trigger finger, Smoky."

Uncle Hoddy's attitude had been a distinct shock to Bob Renton. He went to the Double Eagle Saloon to get a drink, and met Frank Kemp at the bar. Kemp was a lawyer with a gambling complex. About fifty years of age, lean as a greyhound and keen as a fox, Kemp was as able to bring tears to the eyes of a dealer as he was to the eyes of a jury. He was Renton's legal adviser, but had been away from Rincon when Renton caused the arrest of Smoky Hill and Jerky Gillis.

"Old Hoddy Hill threatened to shoot me a while ago," said Renton confidentially.

Kemp toyed with his glass thoughtfully and motioned for the bartender to serve Renton.

"No doubt he would do just that," he said. "I've told you before that Horace Hill will only be goaded so far. I expected such a verdict. You made a fool of yourself, Renton."

"All right," growled Renton. He tossed off a glass of liquor.

"Any answer to that wire to Bradley & Jones?" asked Kemp.

"No. I'll wire them and quote a price. If that buyer don't show up, maybe they'll buy my wire. I guess I'll go and get the mail, and I'll send the wire on the way out."

As Renton crossed the street, Hashknife, Sleepy and the sheriff came down from the depot. Hashknife and Sleepy turned in at the Rincon Hotel, and Renton joined the sheriff.

"Who are the strangers, Moose?" he asked.

"I just met 'em at the depot," replied the sheriff. "The tall one is Shorty Woods, a cattle buyer."

"The buyer for Bradley & Jones?"

"Yeah, I guess he is," replied the sheriff, and walked on down the street to his office, where he found Smoky Hill talking with Speck Magee.

"That new buyer for Bradley & Jones jist got in, Smoky," said the sheriff. "He's at the Rincon Hotel, and if I was you I'd see him before Renton does."

"Thanks very much, Sheriff," said Smoky. "I'll go up there right now."

Hashknife and Sleepy had barely reached their room when Smoky came in.

"Are you Mr. Woods, the new buyer for Bradley & Jones?" asked Smoky anxiously.

"I reckon I am." Hashknife smiled. In spite of Smoky's cowboy garb, it was not difficult for the two men to see that their visitor was not a range bred youngster. "What can I do for you?" asked the tall cowboy kindly.

"I—I want you to give Uncle Hoddy a chance," replied Smoky.

"Uh-huh." Hashknife looked the boy over keenly. "Jist who is Uncle Hoddy, and what kind of a chance does he need?"

Smoky fairly bubbled over in his eagerness to explain things. It was made plain that Renton had offered inducements to the former buyer, thereby preventing this Horace Hill from disposing of his stock. Smoky explained about his letter to the firm, and their reply. Hashknife smiled to himself to think that this tenderfoot had in all probability been the cause of the old buyer's losing his job. It also explained why the real Shorty Woods had been transferred.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Hashknife. "I'll see

Horace Hill. I'm not bound to buy from Renton."

"Gee, that's great!" Smoky's eyes sparkled. "You look like a square shooter."

"Thank you." Hashknife returned the compliment by adding in a friendly tone, "And I think you've told me the truth."

Smoky was puzzled.

"Why, I wouldn't have any reason for lying to you."

"Pardner"—Hashknife smiled—"when you've lived in the range country as long as I have, you'll find out that men don't have to have a reason to tell lies."

Smoky's laughter was serious.

"Well, thanks, anyway," he said. "I'll not bother you any longer to-day, and——"

Some one knocked heavily on the door, and Sleepy stepped over to open it. The caller was Bob Renton. He looked keenly at the two men, then shifted his gaze to Smoky.

"Which of you is Shorty Woods?" he asked.

Hashknife stepped out, but did not say who he was. Renton looked at him for a moment.

"My name's Renton," he said. "I own the Flying V outfit."

"Well?" queried Hashknife.

"You've heard of me, haven't you?"

"Yeah," said Hashknife truthfully. In fact, he had heard quite a lot about him in the last few minutes.

Renton looked at Smoky.

"What are you doing here, Hill?"

"That's part of my own business," replied Smoky coldly.

Renton flushed angrily and turned to Hashknife.

"Is that tenderfoot kid any special friend of yours?"

Hashknife looked at Smoky for a moment before he replied.

"Not special—just a friend, Mr. Renton."

"Well, all right. I wanted to talk with you about that order for five hundred head for Bradley & Jones. When do you want 'em?"

Hashknife scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"They haven't been bought yet, have they?" he asked curiously.

"Certainly they haven't been bought. But I happen to know that your firm wants this as a rush order. I wired them that I could furnish that amount."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Renton—I'm doin' the buyin'."

"I understand all that. You want to buy, and I've got the stuff."

"If I want to buy it," added Hashknife.

Renton was at a loss for a moment.

"Well, now, you—I don't quite understand you. I've been selling Bradley & Jones all the beef they've shipped from here for over four years, and——"

"And their buyer lost his job," added Hashknife.

Renton's jaw shut tightly for a moment.

"You see," said Hashknife, "Bradley & Jones would naturally tell a new man on this territory jist why the former salesman lost his job. They warn you once, you know."

"Well, I don't have to sell to Bradley & Jones," flared Renton.

"They know it. There ain't no law on earth that would force you to sell to them if you didn't want to, Mr. Renton. I'm here to buy beef, and it ain't Bradley & Jones' idea to favour one man more than another, as long as the stuff grades and the price is

right. I'm not playin' the game the way it's been played here."

Renton thought the situation over for a few moments.

"Are you going to look at the Tumbling H stuff?" he asked.

"I expect I will,' Mr. Renton.

"All right. I wish you luck, Mr. Woods."

"Thank you, Mr. Renton; I make my own luck. Good-bye."

Renton walked out and closed the door ungently. Smoky's mouth drew back in a wide grin of delight. Hashknife looked at him seriously as he said:

"Young feller, you better dig up five hundred head of beef or I'll lose my job."

"We'll furnish 'em, Mr. Woods. Gee, that was a circus! I've never heard anybody talk to Renton like that."

"I suppose I'll get my big mouth slapped before I get out of Rincon." Hashknife sighed.

"I want to see somebody try it," Smoky laughed. "Well, I've got to go home and tell Uncle Hoddy about this."

When Smoky closed the door Sleepy looked thoughtfully at Hashknife.

"You're a hell of a cattle buyer," he said.

"Wait'll I buy some, won't you? Anyway, I took all the slack out of Mr. Renton's rope. Let's go find a place to eat."

Renton went straight back to the Double Eagle Saloon, where he found Kemp, to whom he told his troubles.

"That's rather amusing," mumbled Kemp, who was quite drunk.

"What's amusing about it?" demanded Renton.

"This new buyer turning to the Tumbling H."

"It may be funny to you," growled Renton.

"I'm not laughing."

"Well, they haven't shipped any Tumbling H stuff—yet."

"No rough stuff," warned Kemp quickly. "Brains are better than six-shooters. You made a fool out of yourself to-day, Renton; don't make it a habit."

CHAPTER III

"I NEVER expected to see you," declared Uncle Hoddy, when Hashknife and Sleepy arrived at the ranch the next morning. "My luck has been so bad I never expected to see another buyer. Jerky, you saddle a couple extra broncs. Ma! Ma-a-a-a! Kill six or eight of them yaller legged chickens; we've got company for dinner. C'mon and meet ma. Jerky, you git them horses ready; we're goin' to look at cows. Smoky, will you quit grinnin' and help ma massacree hens?"

Hashknife and Sleepy grinned widely. This was their kind of folks.

As they sauntered down to the corrals Uncle Hoddy said:

"I reckon Smoky told you a lot of things. He's a talkin' fool, that boy. But he means awful well. Me and ma shore think a lot of that kid. Jist comes out here from the city and digs right into things. Nervy as a young bobcat. Yessir, Smoky is all right."

"Well, he did tell us a few things," said Hashknife.

"Well, I dunno. The way things was goin', I'd be busted flat in another six months. You can't

keep on raisin' cows if you can't sell. Bradley & Jones is a big outfit. In fact, they've kind of got an exclusive on things out here. Most other buyers keep away."

"Renton kinda undersold the market, didn't he, Hill?"

"I'll betcha he did. And I'll also betcha that Bradley & Jones paid full market price. Somebody got a nice cut of that money."

"I guess that was the trouble. When Smoky wrote that letter to Bradley & Jones, it started things."

"Smart kid, that Smoky." The old man grinned. "Educated. Hell, he can tell you what ten times ten is without countin' his fingers or usin' a pencil. Jerky! He-eey! Len'then out them stirrups as far as they'll go; this man's got legs."

"I looked at 'em," drawled Jerky. "And he ain't *all* legs, either."

It was noon when they got back, and the table was supporting more fried chicken than either of the boys had seen in many a day. Hashknife had checked up on enough first-grade stuff to know that the Tumbling H could easily fill the special order. Shorty had told Hashknife when the cars were to be spotted at Rincon, and Uncle Hoddy had promised to load in two days.

As soon as they got back to Rincon they investigated and found that the cars were all ready for them. The agent gave Hashknife a telegram addressed to Shorty Woods.

SPECIAL ORDER DELAYED TOO LONG PLEASE CANCEL STOP GO BACK TO SEATTLE AND WAIT FOR ORDERS STOP AM PUTTING A NEW MAN ON THE SOUTHERN TERRITORY—

BRADLEY

Hashknife whistled softly and handed the telegram to Sleepy, who swore angrily as he handed it back. Hashknife turned to the agent and showed him the telegram.

"We won't need them cars," he said. The agent glanced at the telegram and nodded.

"I'll fix that up for you," he said.

Hashknife thanked him and they walked back down the street. "Do you reckon Shorty will lose his job over this?" asked Sleepy.

"I'm not worryin' about Shorty; I'm worryin' about Hoddy Hill. Gee, this is shore goin' to hit him hard. Twenty-five thousand dollars all gone up in smoke; and the next buyer might play the game with the Flyin' V. Sleepy, I hate to have to tell him—I shore do."

They walked down to the sheriff's office and found him working at his desk, while stretched on a cot at one end of the office was Speck Magee, the deputy. Speck was over six feet tall and would weigh two hundred and fifty pounds. Speck's snore had all the variations from the tremelo of a flute to the grunt of a grizzly.

"Don't mind him," said the sheriff. "He was over to Washout to a dance last night. Speck is like one of them phonographs—he absorbs music. He's doin' a two-step now. After awhile I'll kick the cot, and he'll do a waltz for us. How's the cattle buyin' comin' along?"

Hashknife let him read the telegram, and then explained that he had accepted Tumbling H cattle.

"Well, that's shore tough on Hoddy Hill," said the sheriff. "If he don't have the worst luck! My, I'm sorry about that."

"What was the trouble between Renton's outfit and the Tumbin' H the other day?" asked Sleepy. "Wasn't there a trial?"

The sheriff's explanation of the arrest and the hearing was told in a humorous vein, and it amused Hashknife and Sleepy.

"Renton was awful mad." The sheriff grinned. "He hopped on to Hoddy Hill, and Hoddy came dang near shootin' him. Renton told me he was goin' to get Hill's hide, and I told him that was one hide he better leave alone."

"What the hell's all this pow-wowin' about?" demanded Speck, breaking off in the middle of a deep snore. "Can'tcha let a feller sleep? Hides! Cow covers! Who the hell started this argument, anyway?"

Speck's eyes were closed tightly as he groped at his vest pocket.

"Moose, you Kansas sunflower, didja steal my Durham?" he asked plaintively. "You little bat-eared—Oh, here you are! Who put you in the wrong pocket, little nicky-teen? Moosie. Oh, Moo-o-o-osie! Where's my papers? Didja steal my—Oh, well, I'm lucky; that's all I can say for m'self."

"Always cryin' before you're hurt," grunted the sheriff.

Speck sat up on the cot and blinked sleepily. Speck had a round face, round eyes, and even his nubbin of a nose was round—and red.

"You drank too much last night," said the sheriff.

Speck considered the accusation gravely and nodded slowly. "That's certainly wonderful," he said. "For twenty years I've been tryin' to figure out why I feel like this the next day after a dance. And you, without any experience, give me a solution right off the reel. Moose, you're a wonder. If I had a hat on, I'd take it off to you."

"You never had no hat on when you got home this mornin'."

"I didn't? By golly, that's another solution. You know, I wondered all the time why my head was so damn cold. That was it; I didn't have no hat on. And that Stetson cost me forty dollars."

The sheriff introduced him to Hashknife and Sleepy.

"Oh, you're the buyer that took Harry Rigg's place, eh?"

"I didn't know him," replied Hashknife.

"Well, don't let that git you down. It ain't none of my business, but I wish you'd look over some of Hoddy Hill's stuff. His is the Tumblin' H spread."

Hashknife explained about looking at Hill's cattle, and then let Speck read the telegram from Bradley.

"Well, can you imagine a thing like that!" snorted Speck. "Have you told Uncle Hoddy about the telegram yet?"

"No, I ain't been out there—and I shore hate it, Magee."

"Prob'ly tickle Renton stiff," grunted Speck.

"What's wrong about this Renton person, anyway?" asked Sleepy.

"Renton wants the earth with a fence around it," growled the deputy. "He thinks he's a little tin god around here. But"—Speck grinned widely—"you pull a can opener on him and see him run for a hole."

"The Flyin' V is a big spread, ain't it?" asked Hashknife.

"Biggest around here. Renton spent a lot of money on new buildins. Yeah, he's got a lot of money invested around here. I ort to speak nice about him, I s'pose. But I can't. The only luck I can wish him is that he'd feel every day jist like I feel now."

"You drink too much," said the sheriff gravely.

"No, I don't either, Moose. It's somethin' they put in the stuff."

"Alcohol," said the sheriff.

"You're a wonderful guesser." Speck grinned. "You ort to git one of them big glass balls, tie a' dirty rag around your head and charge folks a dollar a shot to tell their fortunes. If you gents ain't too squeamish, I'd like to buy you a drink; I shore need one."

Uncle Hoddy took the bad news philosophically. Aunt Abbey's eyes were clouded, but all she did was pat Uncle Hoddy on the arm. They had gone through a lot of bad luck together. Jerky Gillis was mad, and went outdoors to do his swearing. Smoky's eyes flashed.

"Renton is behind this," he declared. "He'd move heaven and earth to prevent us from selling those cattle."

"I'm afraid not, Smoky," replied Hashknife. "As a matter of fact, I don't think Bradley & Jones feel any too friendly towards Renton. I guess the delay in shipment was too much. I've got somethin' to confess to you folks; I'm not the buyer from Bradley & Jones, but I had the authority to buy those cows."

Hashknife went ahead and explained about the real Shorty Woods, and just why he had masqueraded to help Shorty keep his job.

"But that's neither here nor there," concluded the tall cowboy. "You've lost a mighty big sale, Shorty has probably lost his job and, as far as I can see, Renton is no better off. I've got to send that telegram to Shorty Woods in Tucson, I suppose."

"I'm sorry about him losin' his job," said Aunt Abbey.

"I still think Renton had a hand in this," insisted Smoky.

"Now Smoky, he couldn't," said Uncle Hoddy mildly. "Mr. Hartley has explained all that to us."

Hashknife was very thoughtful as they rode back to Rincon, and that evening he went up to the depot and wrote out the following telegram:

JACK KINNEAR, KINNEAR AND CO.
ST. LOUIS, MO.
HELLO JACK YOU OLD COW CANNER STOP CAN YOU USE FIVE HUNDRED HEAD TWO YEAR OLD GRADED BEEF STOP WIRE ME AT ONCE—SHORTY WOODS.

The operator smiled as he checked up the cost of the wire.

"I sent them cars out to-day," he said.

"I'll get more if I need 'em," replied Hashknife. "Will you get that wire off to-night? I'll expect an answer before noon, and if I ain't around will you leave it with the sheriff?"

"Sure—you bet."

Hashknife wandered back to the Double Eagle, where he found Sleepy and Speck playing a game of pool. The sheriff was talking with Frank Kemp, and introduced him to Hashknife.

"Mr. Woods is the buyer for Bradley & Jones," explained the sheriff.

"Well"—Kemp smiled—"I shouldn't be very friendly with Mr. Woods, because I happen to be the attorney for Renton. But I really can't hold it too much against you if you buy from somebody else."

"Well, that's a sensible way to look at it," said Hashknife. "It seems to me that the Flyin' V has had their share of sales."

"That's true, Mr. Woods. Let's have a drink."

"As a matter of fact, Bradley & Jones wired me to cancel that order," said Hashknife.

"Cancel the order? What reason did they give?"

"Too much delay. And they've ordered me back to Seattle."

"Are you from Seattle?"

Hashknife nodded.

"But I'm not goin' back up there. Too much fog."

"Yes, that's true. Well, here's luck, gents."

They drank and resumed their conversation.

"So you're not going back to Seattle, eh?" queried Kemp.

"I don't think so," replied Hashknife. "I may not work for Bradley & Jones any longer. I just sent a wire to Jack Kinnear, down in St. Louis, askin' him if he could use that shipment. You see, I used to buy for Kinnear & Company. I shore wish Jack could see that bunch of beef; I'd like to help the old man out."

"Does Kinnear & Company ever have a man making this territory?" asked Kemp.

"No, I don't reckon they do. They buy mostly in the north-west."

"I don't remember ever meeting their buyer," said the sheriff.

"Oh, they're not as big as Bradley & Jones, but they handle good stuff. I guess Renton is pretty sore at me." Hashknife laughed. "But what made me mad was the way he jumped at me. Why, he acted as though I *had* to buy from him."

"I know," said Kemp. "Renton needs an anchor; that's why I work for him. He's cooled off now."

Kemp excused himself, and Hashknife sat down with the sheriff to watch the pool game.

"Kemp's a good lawyer," said the sheriff. "But he ain't ambitious. We wanted to elect him prosecutin' attorney, but he didn't want the job. Drinks like a fish, and he'd set at a poker table for a week. He's a mighty good poker player, too."

"Pleasant sort of a feller," replied Hashknife.

"Oh, shore; everybody likes Kemp. Your pardner is a pretty good pool player."

"Don't let him hear you say that. It's hard enough to live with him as it is."

"Uh-huh. Does he travel with you all the time?"

Hashknife smiled slowly.

"I've been waitin' for somebody to ask me that question. Let's walk down to your office, Raney; I want to tell you somethin'."

"All right—if it's somethin' you want to tell me. I plumb forgot my manners when I asked you that question."

They walked down to the office and Hashknife told his story to the little sheriff. Moose Raney had a sense of humour, and he chuckled over Hashknife's masquerade as Shorty Woods.

But when Hashknife told him his real name, the sheriff jerked back, looking keenly at him.

"Hashknife Hartley? Was you ever down in the San Miguel country—Sunset City——?"

"Couple years ago—yeah."

"Remember Chub Needham?"

"Chub Needham? Why, yea-a-ah. He was killed drivin' stage, wasn't he?"

"Chub Needham was my wife's brother. My wife's dead now, Hartley. But I heard all about the affair down there; heard about the things you done. Man, you cleaned out a bad gang—and you got the man who murdered Chub. Mind shakin' hands with me ag'in, Hartley?"

They shook hands solemnly, then the sheriff sat back, eyeing the tall cowboy closely.

"Well, I'll be danged!" he said softly. "I've allus wanted to meet you. I've heard of you since. I had a feller in jail for stealin' a horse, and he talked about you. He said you was too damn slick for any use. Well, doggone it, I'm shore glad to meetcha, Hartley. What's your pardner's name?"

"Sleepy Stevens."

"That's the boy! I 'member it fine, now. Doggone small world! Are you goin' to let everybody know you're Hashknife Hartley?"

"No, I'm not; but I reckon they'll find out. I told the folks down at the Tumblin' H. They're real folks, Raney."

"Jist the best you ever met, Hashknife Hartley. You said you wasn't goin' up to Seattle; where are you figurin' on goin'?"

"Raney"—Hashknife smiled—"we never figure on that. Me and Sleepy just start out, that's all. There's allus a hill ahead, and that's all we ask. We want to see what's on the other side."

"That's a funny way to do, ain't it?"

"I dunno. We're just a pair of drifters, Raney. I'm originally from up in north-east Montana, and Sleepy is from Idaho. I reckon it was fate that drifted us together to the old Hashknife outfit. That's where I got my name. My folks named me Henry. Sleepy's right name is Dave.

"I dunno why it is, but I've allus had a hankerin' to see things. Sleepy had the same hankerin', and so we started out to peek over the hills. I reckon we're kinda queer; but we've seen lots of places and lots of folks. You'd be surprised at the things we've found on the other sides of the hills."

"Yeah, I reckon I would," agreed the sheriff. "But it don't pay."

"If you mean money—it don't. We ain't got as much money as we had the day we left together. But what would we do if we had money? You can't pack money on horseback. All we need is enough to feed us—we'll allus find a place to sleep. Need a pair of overalls once in a while, mebbe a little poker stake."

"But, after all, what does it git you, Hartley?"

"Well, I dunno." Hashknife smiled thoughtfully. "Mem'ries of folks we've helped, I reckon. Mebbe some mem'ries of tight places we've been. But, after all, Raney, it's our way of livin'. Mebbe we'll settle down some day. We've talked about it, me and Sleepy. Mebbe some day we'll run out of hills. There must be an end to 'em."

"Yeah, I suppose it's as good a way to live as any other."

"And you only live once," said Hashknife. "Why not live that one life to suit yourself, as long as you don't hurt anybody."

"That's right. But it's a wonder to me that you two fellers ain't been killed long ago, Hartley."

"Well, we're still goin'. But when our names come up in the Big Book—that's different."

"Do you believe there's a time marked down for all of us?"

"If I didn't, I'd shore be scared to death all the time."

The sheriff nodded thoughtfully.

"Mebbe you're right, Hartley. I never thought much about such things, but I can see where there ain't much use in dodgin' things. Have you any plans on what you're goin' to do?"

"No, not yet. We'll prob'ly take these horses back to the Tumblin' H to-morrow. There's no use stayin' around here, as far as I can see. Even a cow-puncher must work once in a while."

Sleepy wanted to leave Rincon the next day.

"This place is too dead to skin," he declared. "Why, I can't even find a good pool player. Speck said he was good, but I can spot him seven of the fifteen balls and use a broomstick."

"It ain't much of a place." Hashknife yawned. "Let's go up to the depot; I'm expectin' a telegram."

The depot agent explained that he had intended bringing the message down to the hotel, but had been too busy. It was from St. Louis, addressed to Shorty Woods.

SORRY BUT WE ARE NOT IN THE MARKET FOR ANY BEEF STOP KINDEST PERSONAL REGARDS.—JACK KINNEAR.

If there was any significance in that ordinary telegram, Sleepy failed to see it; but he could read the expression on Hashknife's face as he put the sheet of paper in his pocket.

"Do we leave Rincon to-morrow?" asked Sleepy.

"No-o-o," drawled Hashknife, "I don't reckon we will. Sleepy, I've jist struck a soap mine."

"Soap mine? Must be a real streak of lather."

"Correct. Do you know, pardner, I believe I'll sell some cows before we leave Rincon."

"I think you're crazy."

"I've got you beat, cowboy; I know I am."

Smoky came to town later in the day.

"Anything more about a cow sale?" he asked. "Gee, I don't know what's to be done. Uncle Hoddy and Aunt Abbey don't say anything, but I know how they feel inside. I'm as green as grass about all this range stuff, and I make all kinds of fool mistakes, but it's because I want to help them.

Their hopes went up so high, and then came down with an awful dull thud."

"I reckon you're right about how they feel," agreed Hashknife. "They're both old-timers, and they won't yelp. But sometimes it does you good to yelp; kinda relieves the pressure."

"I yelp enough." Smoky smiled. "I can't be bottled up. Why, out there to-day, I got off on a streak, using Bob Renton as my subject. I certainly told the wide world what I thought of him. And did either of them side in with me? They did not. Aunt Abbey got out the family Bible and started reading. I asked her if she was looking for some words I hadn't used, and she said something had to be done to counteract the things I had said about humanity."

"That kinda stopped you, didn't it?" asked Sleepy.

"Sure. So I saddled my horse and came to town."

Smoky ate supper with them that evening, and the three of them were sitting in front of the Rincon Hotel when a passenger train stopped at the depot. They paid no attention to it, but a few minutes later they saw a man and a woman coming down towards the hotel.

"Company comin'," observed Sleepy.

"And," added Hashknife, "the man's either drunk or got blind staggers."

The woman, or rather girl, seemed to be trying to hold him up and at the same time carry a heavy valise. Smoky sprang to his feet and went to her assistance, but the drunken man resented any assistance. The girl was undeniably pretty, but weary, judging from the tired droop of her shoulders as she placed the valise on the sidewalk.

The man was slender, grey haired, well dressed,

his face heavily lined and blotched from dissipation. He waved Smoky aside.

"Lemme 'lone, will you?" he said thickly. "Don' need no help."

"May I carry that valise?" asked Smoky.

The girl sighed deeply, but shook her head as she replied:

"It is only a few steps, thank you."

"Tha's right," said the man. "Don' ask favours 'f anybody."

The girl thanked Smoky with a look, and they went into the hotel. Smoky came back and sat down with the two cowboys.

"That feller ain't had no sudden attack," said Hashknife. "He's been drunk all his life, it looks to me."

"Gee, that girl surely looks sad about it!" said Smoky.

"She should be," replied Sleepy. "It's quite a chore, leadin' a drunk around a strange town."

Smoky waited a while, and then went into the hotel, where he looked at the old ink-spattered register.

"Mark Stillwell and Marion Stillwell," he told Hashknife and Sleepy. "Separate rooms, too. Must be father and daughter."

"Where are they from?" asked Hashknife.

"Seattle, Washington."

"Yea-a-ah? Seattle, eh?"

"Anythin' wrong about folks from Seattle?" Sleepy grinned.

"Somethin' wrong with the man, but he can't blame Seattle." Hashknife laughed.

CHAPTER IV

"WELL, now I'll tell you what you better do," said the sheriff seriously. "Go and sober up. You look to me as though you had been drunk for a month. You're as shaky as a basket of snakes."

The man who had arrived drunk in Rincon the previous night sat in a chair in the sheriff's office at Rincon, dishevelled, unshaved. His eyes were red and his hands unsteady.

"Never mind that," he growled. "I've got a mortgage on that Tumbling H outfit; a mortgage ten years old—and not a damn cent of interest has ever been paid. Want to see it?"

"No, I don't want to see it," replied the sheriff. "It's none of my business."

"Well, I've got it. That's all I've got left in the world, and I'm going to cash in on it. To hell with everybody. That's my motto. I'm Mark Stillwell —what's left of him. I've been a good fellow. No more. Do you hear me?"

Stillwell was almost shouting his last words. The sheriff shook his head sadly. He had seen men that way before — on the verge of delirium tremens. Stillwell laughed harshly and got to his feet.

"I'm going out there and claim what is mine," he said.

"Well, I don't reckon anybody is goin' to stop you, Stillwell."

"Nobody can stop me."

He walked outside, going erratically towards the livery stable. The sheriff sighed and turned back to his work.

"Stillwell," he muttered. "That name's familiar—somehow. Ten years ago—Mark Stillwell. That's right. A millionaire—Stillwell. He came here to hunt, and lived at the Tumblin' H. By golly, that's right. That seems a long time ago. Tough on Hoddy Hill."

Smoky Hill saw Stillwell leave the sheriff's office. Smoky had come from a store to get a sack from the buckboard, and Aunt Abbey was in the store, talking with Marion Stillwell. Smoky had been introduced to her by the hotel proprietor. He went into the store and told Marion that her father had gone over to the livery stable.

"I wonder where he is going?" she said anxiously.

"He—you see, he isn't—oh, I don't know how to say it."

"That's all right," said Smoky quickly. "He's been drinking too much, that's all."

"I know he has. For the last two weeks he has never sobered."

"Where do you think he is going now?"

Marion hesitated, as she looked at the old lady.

"I think he has gone out to your place," she said. "There was something about a mortgage."

The old lady stared at her for several moments.

"Stillwell," she said slowly. "Oh, I know now. I—I didn't remember—it was ten years ago. Mark Stillwell!"

Marion nodded. Smoky put his hand on his aunt's shoulder.

"What is it, Aunt Abbey?" he asked.

"The mortgage against Tumblin' H," she said slowly.

"I didn't know there was a mortgage."

"Ten years ago," said the old lady, as though talking to herself, "Mark Stillwell came here. He

was a millionaire sportsman. He lived at the ranch awhile, and hunted with Hoddy. We — we needed money badly. He offered to take a mortgage for ten thousand dollars. It—it didn't seem much to him, but it was a lot to us.

" It was mighty hard to git money in them days. That money put us on our feet. Mark Stillwell left his address, and six months later we sent him the interest money. But it came back. In a year we sent the interest for one whole year, and it came back. We have never been able to locate Mark Stillwell. And now he is here."

" A seven per cent. mortgage ? " asked Smoky, and the old lady nodded.

Smoky whistled in amazement.

" Why, Aunt Abbey, at seven per cent. for ten years, the interest alone is worth seven thousand ! Is that the reason Uncle Hoddy always said he couldn't sell the ranch ? "

" That was the reason, Smoky."

" Gee whiz ! Why, that's terrible ! I wonder if he really went out to see Uncle Hoddy ? "

" He said he was going out there," replied Marion. " Oh, I wish daddy was himself again. He drinks all the time and he is so unreasonable. He even forgets that I am with him."

" Was he drunk this morning ? " asked Smoky.

Mariod nodded wearily.

" Oh, yes, as bad as ever. And he can't stand much more. He sits and drinks for hours from a bottle. He hates everybody and everything. Sometimes he forgets who I am and hates me, too."

" Hate is a terrible thing, Marion," said Aunt Abbey.

" I know. I only hope you won't hate me for this mortgage. It was all we had left in the world, and we only had that through accident. It was left

with some other private papers for years. I believe daddy had forgotten it; he had enough happen to make him forget things, I suppose."

"Bless your heart," said Aunt Abbey, "I never hate anybody. You can't help this. But we can't pay off that mortgage. We're as poor as church mice. Everything has gone wrong lately. We haven't even got the interest money any more."

It was nearing the noon hour, and Smoky suggested to Marion that she have dinner with them. Marion was glad to accept, and they ate together. They were just finishing their meal when the sheriff came in. He stopped at the doorway and looked at them several moments before coming over to them. His eyes were very grave as he said:

"You are Miss Stillwell?"

"Yes," said Marion.

"I've got some awful bad news for you, ma'am."

"My father?" asked Marion, getting up quickly.

"Yeah—your father is dead."

"Dead? Oh, no! You don't mean that! You can't——"

"Doggone, I'm awful sorry to have to tell you thataway, but I——"

"What in the world happened to him?" asked Aunt Abbey.

"He got shot," replied the sheriff grimly. "Hoddy's down at the office now, and——"

"Hoddy didn't—— No, Raney!"

"There ain't been nobody accused yet, Aunt Abbey. You all better come down to the office. We're goin' out after the body."

They found Hashknife, Sleepy and Speck with Uncle Hoddy. The old man's face was grim. Aunt Abbey put an arm around his shoulders, and waited for some one to explain things. Marion did not weep, and Hashknife looked at her admiringly.

"Well, can't somebody say somethin'?" asked Aunt Abbey.

"The prosecutin' attorney will be here in a minute," said the sheriff. "I want him to hear what Hoddy says about it."

"Hoddy, you didn't do it."

"No, ma, I never killed him."

"That's enough for me, Hoddy."

Al Englund, the prosecuting attorney, arrived in a few minutes, and the sheriff explained things to him.

"I'm leavin' Speck here," said the sheriff, "while me and the coroner go down there after the body."

"Can you wait a minute, Sheriff?" asked Hashknife. "I'd like to hear Uncle Hoddy's story, and I'd like to go with you, too."

"All right; the coroner ain't here yet."

"Stillwell comes out to my place," said the old man slowly. "I didn't recognise him at all. It's been ten years since I seen him, and he's changed a lot. And he was drunk. Had a bottle with him, and he acted queer. He said he'd come to take the Tumblin' H away from me, on account of that mortgage. I admitted the mortgage. Why, I tried to send him the interest money, but it always come back.

"Well, he raved about everybody givin' him a bad deal, and he said that nobody could ever give him a bad deal again. He wanted me to git off the ranch right now. I tell you, I couldn't argue with him, 'cause he acted so crazy. After 'while he said he was goin' back to town and git the sheriff to throw me off the place. He took a drink, throwed the bottle at me and got on his horse.

"After he rode away, I got to thinkin' about him. I didn't know what he might do; so I saddled my horse and headed for town. I didn't know if he

had a gun or not. Anyway, I was ridin' this way, and about a mile or so this side of the ranch, where that old dry wash cuts the road, I find him lyin' almost in the middle of the road, and his horse is a little further along, standin' on a loose rein.

"I thought the man had fell off his horse or been thrown off, but when I got off my horse and looked him over, he'd been shot. There wasn't nobody around there. Then I got on my horse and come in to report it. That's all I've got to say."

"He had a mortgage against the Tumbling H?" queried the attorney. Hoddy nodded grimly.

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Did he show it to you, Hoddy?"

"No, he never showed it to me."

"He had it with him when he went to git his horse," said the sheriff. "He pulled it out and asked me if I wanted to see it, but I didn't."

"This is Miss Stillwell, his daughter," said Hashknife.

The attorney bowed gravely to her.

"I'm mighty sorry, ma'am," he said, and turned to Uncle Hoddy.

"You say you tried to pay him the interest on this mortgage?"

"I kept sendin' it to him, and it allus come back. It was the address he gave me—the only one I knew."

The lawyer turned to Marion.

"Miss Stillwell, I don't like to question you right now, but do you know of any reason why that interest money never reached your father?"

"I—I think I can answer that," she replied, her lips quivering. "In less than six months after my father was down here, he—he was in the prison at Walla Walla."

No one made any comment, and after a few moments she resumed.

"He was imprisoned for embezzling a big amount of money, but he was not guilty. His partner juggled the books to make it appear that daddy did it. They never got his partner—and daddy served eight long years for another man's crime."

"I reckon we can go now," said Hashknife softly. "The coroner is outside."

Doctor Reber, the coroner, had a light wagon. They rode down to the scene of the killing with him. The body was exactly as Uncle Hoddy had described it. His footprints were around the body. Stillwell had been shot through the heart, and the bullet was still in the body. The sheriff searched the pockets, which were completely empty.

The sheriff swore softly as he stood up and looked down at the corpse.

"Looks bad for Hoddy Hill, eh?" said Hashknife.

"I was hopin' we'd find that mortgage in his pocket. Damn the luck! Hoddy Hill — my friend."

"Circumstantial evidence has hung many an innocent man," said Hashknife.

"I know it has, Hartley—less evidence than this, too. Nobody to prove any alibi for him; only his story for a defence. Say! I wonder where Jerky Gillis is? He wasn't in town with Smoky and Aunt Abbey, and he wasn't at the ranch."

"You mean Jerky might have done it?"

"Jerky," said the sheriff, "is absolutely loyal to the Tumblin' H. If he knowed about that mortgage—— Aw, I'm a damn fool to be talkin' like that. Let's get this body back to town. What do you think, Doc?"

"I know only what we can all see, Raney," replied the coroner.

"Cut the bullet out, Doc," said Hashknife. "Get

the angle it went in, and we can see if it was shot from a man on foot or on a horse."

"I don't see what difference that makes, Mr. Hartley."

"Anyway"—Hashknife smiled—"it's the scientific way of doin' things."

They loaded the body and went back to town, where the sheriff had a talk with the prosecuting attorney.

"I'm sorry," said the prosecutor sincerely, "but we've simply got to hold Hoddy Hill. I hate it as much as you do, Raney, but duty is duty."

"I wish to hell you was sheriff, instead of me, Al," said the sheriff bitterly. "Damn it all, Hoddy is my best friend."

Jerky Gillis came riding in after the arrest had been made. He was fiercely indignant.

"I'll bust your damned old jail, Raney," he declared. "I tell you, you jist can't keep Hoddy in jail."

"Oh, cool down, will you?" retorted the sheriff. "I hate it as much as you do. Go on home."

Jerky went away, shaking his head. He found Aunt Abbey, Marion and Smoky in front of the hotel, and Smoky introduced him to the girl.

"She's goin' home with us, Jerky," said Aunt Abbey. "Her father had all their money and it was stolen off his body along with the mortgage. She's got to have some place to live while she's here."

Marion was crying, and Jerky walked away, grunting some of his choicest profanity under his breath.

"I've gotta kill somebody," he told Speck Magee.

"All right," replied Speck. "Go ahead—I'll pick up behind you."

Hashknife and Sleepy stood at a hitch-rack and watched the party leave for the ranch.

" I don't reckon we'll be leavin' here for a while," said Sleepy.

Hashknife's grey eyes blinked thoughtfully.

" It shore looks bad for Hoddy Hill," he said.

" Ain't no way to help him, is there ? "

" I dunno. I can't believe Hoddy killed that man ; and still the evidence shows he did. If he didn't there's either a lobo or a coyote loose in this country. If it's a lobo, we'll have to go easy, 'cause a lobo is a smart killer. I reckon I'll have to wait until I get a better look at his tracks."

CHAPTER V

The Flyin' V was by long odds the most up-to-date ranch in that part of Arizona. Renton had owned it five years, and during that time had improved it greatly. Renton had always wanted the Tumbling H ranch, because of the water and the valuable range. He had offered Hoddy Hill a fair price for his holdings, but the old man turned it down. Renton, angry because his offer had been turned down, decided to drive Hill off the range.

It was the day after the Stillwell murder, and Frank Kemp, the lawyer, had ridden out to talk with Renton. They were sitting in the comfortable main room of the ranch-house, discussing the murder.

"Do you think Hoddy Hill murdered him, Frank?" asked Renton.

Kemp bit the end off a cigar, gripped it between his teeth and leaned back comfortably in a leather chair.

"I doubt it," he said finally. "The evidence points to Hill; and he seems to be the only person in this country who had sufficient motive to do the job. But—well, that's all I know about it."

"You say this man Stillwell was on the verge of delirium tremens?"

"According to his daughter's admissions, Stillwell had been drinking steadily for weeks. Yes, I suppose he was close to seeing snakes."

"How old is this daughter, Frank?"

"Oh, I'd say she was around eighteen. Pretty girl. By the way, I suppose you've heard that the tall, lean cattle buyer is not Shorty Woods."

Renton went to the fireplace, where he took tobacco and papers from the mantel.

"Where did you get that information?" he asked.

"I don't believe it's any secret. I heard it talked over in the Double Eagle Saloon, and I asked the sheriff about it. He said the man's name is Hash-knife Hartley. Have you ever heard that name?"

"Hartley? No, I don't believe I have, Frank. What about him?"

"The sheriff knew quite a bit about him, it seems. Raney isn't a man to exaggerate, and he says Hartley is the best range detective in the country, if not in the entire West."

Renton leaned back and blew a thin stream of smoke towards the ceiling.

"That covers quite a lot of territory," he said.

"I'm only saying what Raney told me; I'm not swearing to it, Bob."

"Did he say why this man Hartley impersonated Woods?"

"He said Woods was sick. Hartley is apparently interested in this Stillwell murder. I understand he had the sheriff and coroner wait until he could hear what Hill had to say, and then went with them to get the body."

"Who hired him to work on the case?"

"Oh, I suppose it was merely curiosity."

"Did you talk with the prosecutor about the case against Hill?"

"Oh, just a few words. I don't imagine he's any too keen on prosecuting the old man."

"Where's Stillwell's daughter?"

Kemp laughed shortly.

"She's staying at the Hill ranch."

"The devil she is! That's a funny idea."

"She hasn't a dime; and she had to live some-

where. They invited her out there. We've got time to attend that inquest in Rincon, if we go in now."

"Sure, I'd like to see what is said and done."

And that same morning Hashknife sent a wire to Shorty Woods, in Tucson:

> BRADLEY CANCELLED ALL BUYING AND ORDERS YOU TO SEATTLE STOP YOU BETTER WIRE THEM FOR CONFIRMATION AND WIRE ME LATER STOP USE MY RIGHT NAME HASHKNIFE HARTLEY.

The little courtroom at Rincon was packed to suffocation, and as quiet as a tomb, when Hoddy Hill stepped down from the witness stand after telling his story to the jury. Grim-faced men listened to the old man's story, but few believed him.

The sheriff testified to having talked with Stillwell, and it was his opinion that the man had been mentally unbalanced from liquor. The coroner's testimony showed that Stillwell had been shot through the heart with a .44 calibre revolver and, judging from the angle of the bullet, the shot had been fired on a level with the target. Hashknife had examined the bullet, which had stopped against a rib, but was not battered.

There was a buzz of conversation, which stilled quickly as Marion Stillwell was called to the stand. She seemed cool and unhurried, her voice pitched low.

"Miss Stillwell," said the coroner, "we all understand just how painful this must be to you, but it is necessary."

"Yes, I understand," she replied.

"Miss Stillwell, suppose you tell us what brought you and your father to Rincon. Mr. Hill says he

tried to send the interest money to your father, but it was always returned."

Marion nodded slowly.

"I think I should go back several years; so you may understand. My mother died when I was six years of age and I went to live with my aunt and grandmother. Daddy was in business in Seattle and I rarely saw him. But I knew he was becoming wealthy. When I was eight years of age, something went wrong with daddy's business.

"The newspapers were full of it. Vast amounts of money belonging to other people were missing. Albert La Rue, daddy's manager, was missing, and the papers hinted that some one had killed him. The books had been altered to show that daddy was the guilty one, and all of his fortune was taken away to pay the losses.

"The police searched for months, but were unable to find La Rue. And they sent daddy to the penitentiary for ten years. Everything we owned was gone. My grandmother died three years ago, but I still lived with my aunt. About a year ago daddy was released. My aunt believed in him, gave him money and used her influence to get him a position. But he couldn't hold a job, because he drank so heavily.

"Finally my aunt told him she would do no more for him. She gave him some old papers he had left at her house shortly after he came back from his hunting trip down here. He had forgotten them. All of them were worthless except this mortgage.

"Daddy thought it might be a chance to get some money, and after many discussions my aunt financed the trip down here, if I could come along. I think you know the rest, Doctor."

"Thank you, Miss Stillwell. But did they ever find La Rue?"

"No, he never was found."

"Did you know La Rue?"

"No, I never saw him in my life."

"That is all, thank you."

The jury was out five minutes, and asked that Horace Hill be held for trial at the next term of court.

Late that afternoon Hashknife got an answer to his wire to Shorty Woods.

YOUR WIRE TO-DAY CONFIRMED BY BRADLEY STOP LEAVING FOR SEATTLE TO-NIGHT STOP BEST REGARDS TO BOTH OF YOU—SHORTY.

"Well, that ends our connection with Shorty," said Hashknife. "I hope he don't lose his job."

"I'll bet Renton wired a lot of stuff to Bradley & Jones."

"Somebody queered Shorty, that's sure," agreed Hashknife.

They went down to the sheriff's office and Hashknife asked to examine Hoddy Hill's six-shooter. It was a .44 single-action Colt, containing four cartridges. Hoddy had explained that he had only four cartridges.

"These old peacemakers ought to shoot plumb through a man," said Hashknife.

"But that bullet hit a rib," said the sheriff.

"It laid against a rib," corrected Hashknife. "That bullet wasn't even dubbed on the point."

"I know it wasn't."

Hashknife was sitting on the edge of the sheriff's desk, dangling the gun in his hand, when Frank Kemp strolled in.

"Do you know anythin' about ballistics?" asked Hashknife.

"Very little," said the lawyer. "What was the argument?"

"It wasn't an argument," replied the sheriff. "Hashknife has an idea that a bullet from Hill's gun should have gone all the way through Stillwell, or been battered worse than it was."

"More than that," said Hashknife, "I don't believe this gun ever fired that bullet."

"It's a .44," said the sheriff.

"That part is all right."

"On what do you base your contention?" asked Kemp.

Hashknife looked at the gun, lifted his eyes and smiled at the lawyer.

"You might say it was just a hunch."

"Oh! Well, I'm afraid a jury would give little consideration to a mere hunch, Mr. Hartley."

"Yeah, you're right—they wouldn't. Was that mortgage ever recorded in this county?"

"No, it wasn't," replied the sheriff. "I've looked. That piece of paper was worth seventeen thousand dollars to Stillwell—and men have been murdered for a lot less than that."

"Did Miss Stillwell know how much money her father had on him?"

"Less than a hundred dollars."

"I've known Hoddy Hill for a dozen years," said the sheriff, "and in all that time I've never known him to do a mean thing. But you never can tell what a man will do to protect himself."

"Humans are never reliable all the time," said Kemp.

"I guess me and Sleepy will ride out to the Tumblin' H to-day," said Hashknife. "I wish I knew somethin' to do to help the old man, but it's shore a blank. As far as I can see, Hoddy Hill was the only man in this country with any reason to

kill Stillwell. And you've got to have a reason you know."

"And it takes a mighty good reason for a murder," said Kemp.

CHAPTER VI

JERKY GILLIS stood with his back against the doorway, looking at Aunt Abbey slumped in a rocking chair, frail and white, her hands clasped in front of her. She tried to smile at him.

"You've got to keep your nerve," he said. "You can't let this git you down. Us old-timers has gotta be tough, Aunt Abbey."

"I've been tough, Jerky," she replied. "I've taken it all with a smile. But they've taken Hoddy away from me. Why, he never killed that man no more than you did. Jerky, what have I done to deserve this?"

"Gawd, you ain't never done nothin'—except be good. Why, dawgone it, I—aw, hell!"

"Where is Marion, Jerky?"

"She's a-settin' on the porch—jist a-settin' there. She done sent a telegram to her aunt in Seattle—I s'pose it was—and they can't bury her pa until she hears from her."

"She's a nice girl, Jerky."

"Yeah, she seems to be awful nice. Aw, I wish to gosh I knowed some way to git Uncle Hoddy out of that jail."

"That's all I'd ever ask, Jerky. All I ever want in the world is to have him back with me again. We've been married forty years, and he ain't never been away more than over one night."

Jerky went softly outside. He stopped on the steps and looked at Marion, but she did not turn her head.

"I cain't help you none," he said to himself. "Gawd, sometimes a feller is plumb helpless. Might as well have rheumatism."

He went down to the corral, where he threw a saddle on a tall, snake-headed roan. He yanked the cinch tight, and the animal bit savagely at him. But Jerky didn't mind. He led the animal out of the corral, kicked the gate shut and was in the saddle before the startled animal could whirl.

The roan had only been saddled once before, and Jerky knew it was not a fit animal to ride to town; but Jerky craved violent action—and he got it. Marion came out of her reverie with a cry of alarm when that bucking roan came down past the porch with old Jerky Gillis riding him straight up.

Gravel flew like hail against the walls of the house. Straight down through the big gateway, where Jerky flung himself sidewise to escape being caught against a gatepost. The roan tried to cut off the road, but Jerky swayed ahead in his saddle, slashing the left side of the roan's head with his hat, forcing him back. They disappeared in a cloud of dust, heading for Rincon.

Less than a quarter of a mile down the road he met Hashknife and Sleepy. They gave him plenty of room, and he was too busy to speak to them as he raced past.

"Wasn't that Jerky Gillis?" asked Sleepy.

"What I could see of him, it shore resembled Jerky," replied Hashknife. "That old rawhider is some jockey, if you ask me."

"He must be goin' to town in a hurry."

"It's a cinch the horse is." Hashknife laughed.

Jerky covered those three miles in record time,

and it required all his strength to pull up the roan on the main street of Rincon. He fairly flung the animal against a hitch-rack, and was off before the animal realised what was being done. He tied the roan securely and went clattering down the sidewalk to the Double Eagle, where he leaned wearily against the bar.

"Whisky," he ordered hoarsely.

He poured out a stiff drink, and grabbed at the bottle when the bartender started to take it away.

"Leave her lay as she is," he ordered. "I'm hankerin' for whisky."

"I thought you wasn't goin' to git drunk no more after what happened to you and Smoky and the calf," said the bartender, grinning.

"I'm drinkin' enough to last me a long time, pardner."

Drink after drink went down his throat. After he had downed eight, he sang a little song to the bartender. Jerky's voice was not so good, but his intentions were of the best. Four more drinks and he seemed to sober.

"That's all I can stummick," he told the bartender. "Another one and I couldn't talk straight. *Adios.*"

Jerky lurched away from the bar, walked steadily out of the saloon and headed straight for the sheriff's office, where he found the sheriff and the prosecuting attorney. As far as outward appearances were concerned, Jerky was sober as any man could be.

"Hello, Jerky," said the sheriff. "Want to see Hoddy?"

Jerky's lips twisted painfully as he drew out his six-shooter and laid it on the sheriff's desk.

"There's m'gun," said Jerky. "This has gone far enough."

"What do you mean?" asked the sheriff in amazement.

"I shot Stillwell—that's what I mean."

"You shot Stillwell? Jerky, do you mean that?"

The old rawhider's face twisted in a bitter smile.

"Would a innercent man run his neck into a rope for fun?"

"Sit down, Gillis," said the prosecutor. "You've got to explain things to us. Why would you shoot Stillwell?"

"Why? On account of that damn' mortgage, that's why. I was there at the ranch, and I heard Stillwell ravin' at Hoddy. I knowed about that mortgage before. Me and Hoddy talked about it. So I saddled a horse and met Stillwell. He refused to give me the paper; so I shot him. I was a-helpin' Hoddy, that's all."

The prosecutor leaned closer to Gillis.

"Where is the mortgage, Gillis?"

"Go to hell, will you! That there mortgage ain't recorded, and if it ain't never found, Hoddy don't have to pay it back."

"Where is the hundred dollars he had on him?"

"He never had no money with him. Somebody lied about that. I ort to know—I had the first search of him."

The sheriff and the prosecutor looked at each other. Finally the sheriff turned to Jerky.

"Why did you give yourself up like this, Jerky? We'd never suspected you."

"Didn't you know we would suspect Hoddy Hill?" asked the lawyer.

"How'd I know Hoddy was goin' to foller him to town?" countered Jerky.

"That's true." The prosecutor nodded. "Will you sign a confession?"

"I won't sign a damn' thing; it's up to you to convict me."

The lawyer laughed shortly.

"Well, I guess the only thing to do is to put Jerky Gillis in jail and proceed legally to release Hoddy Hill. What calibre is that gun?"

"It's a fo'ty-fo'," said Jerky quickly.

"What did you do with the empty shell after you shot Stillwell?" asked the sheriff.

"Aw, I dunno; I reckon I et it. Want to hear me sing?"

"Jerky, you're drunk."

"All right—you win, Raney. I knowed it would be a long time between drinks; so I brung one with me. Wharat is m' cell? I crave to git off m' feet."

The sheriff rode home with Uncle Hoddy. Hashknife and Sleepy were sitting in the shade of the stable when they came in. Smoky went up to the house, and the sheriff rode down to the stable. He dismounted and squatted on his heels with the two cowboys.

"Jerky Gillis confessed to murderin' Stillwell," said the sheriff. "He told a straight story, and the prosecutor turned Hoddy loose."

The sheriff detailed Jerky's confession.

"Do you remember when we came down to git Stillwell's body? Remember me wonderin' where Jerky was all that time?"

Hashknife nodded thoughtfully.

"Well, why don'tcha say somethin', Hashknife?" asked the sheriff.

"What can I say, Raney?"

"I dunno. They'll hang Jerky as sure as hell."

"Jerky knows the penalty, I reckon. Here comes Smoky."

The youngster had tears in his eyes, but he didn't seem ashamed of them.

"Can you imagine it?" he asked, a catch in his voice. "They're all up there, crying over Jerky Gillis."

"Well, why not?" queried Hashknife seriously.

"Don't jump on me," wailed Smoky. "I cried too."

No one spoke for a time. The sheriff was drawing designs in the dirt with the blade of his knife. Then he said:

"Miss Stillwell got a telegram. We brought it out to her."

"From her aunt in Oregon," said Smoky. "She's coming here."

"Goin' to hold the funeral after she gets here?" asked Raney.

Smoky nodded. The sheriff stood up.

"Well, I'm goin' back to town," he said.

"We'll ride with you," said Hashknife. "Did Jerky have a .44?"

"Yeah." The sheriff nodded. "One of them old hawg-legs."

"Shoot like a rifle," muttered Hashknife. "Smoky, you tell the folks we couldn't stay for supper."

They rode back to Rincon and stabled their horses. Jerky's roan had been put up by Speck Magee. Hashknife and Sleepy found Speck at the Double Diamond bar, talking with two of the Flying V cowboys, whose dirty clothes and streaked faces showed that they had been working. Speck introduced them as Kegley and Hayes.

"You boys been workin' in the dust?" asked Hashknife.

"I'd tell a man!" Kegley laughed. "We've been loadin' a bunch of beef at Washout, and that damned old loadin' corral is knee-deep in dust."

"Flyin' V stuff?" asked Hashknife.

"Yeah. Sendin' a bunch of graded stuff to St. Louis."

"To Bradley & Jones?"

"I dunno," replied Hayes. "I reckon it's the same outfit we've been sellin' to all along."

"How does it happen you're shippin' from Washout instead of here?"

"It's nearer," replied Kegley. "We do most of our shippin' from Washout. We built the shippin' corrals there a couple years ago."

This gave Hashknife plenty of food for thought, and when Renton and Steve Taylor, his foreman, came to Rincon late that evening, Hashknife asked Renton about it.

"Why, certainly, I'm shipping to Bradley & Jones," he replied briskly. "Sold 'em by wire. That's why they wired you to cancel. We took your cars."

"You kinda slipped one over on us, eh?" The tall cowboy smiled.

"Why not? I've done business a long time with Bradley & Jones, and everything has been satisfactory. It is my opinion that they had an idea that Shorty was pulling some sort of a queer deal down here, and that is why they ordered him back to Seattle."

Hashknife nodded slowly.

"Well, I done the best I could for him."

"You did. Now, I'll buy a drink."

"No use quarrellin' with a winner." Hashknife laughed. "We'll have that drink, Renton."

Later Hashknife went down to see Jerky Gillis, who was sober but unrepentant.

"I ain't sayin' a thing, Hashknife," he said. "I come in here drunk and of my own free will. I ain't sayin' a word about that there mortgage, and I've done said I didn't git any money off Stillwell."

"That's all right, Jerky; but don'tcha know they hang men for murder?"

"You can't scare me a damn bit. As far as I know, I ain't got a relative on earth. There ain't nobody but me worryin' about me bein' in jail. I said I killed Stillwell, but they've got to prove it."

"I think you're an old rawhidin' liar, Jerky," said Hashknife softly.

"Yeah-a-ah?" If I was out of here I'd make you eat them words."

"Above all things, I hate a liar."

"Moose! He-e-ey!"

"What do you want?" asked the sheriff.

"Throw this horse-faced insulter out of this jail—and keep him out. Either do that or lemme at him."

Hashknife laughed and walked out.

"What do you think of him?" queried the sheriff, after closing the corridor door.

"I think that God made a man when he made Jerky Gillis."

"You think Jerky didn't do it?"

"Whether he did or didn't, my opinion still stands."

Hashknife was a little puzzled by things. It would have been easily possible for Jerky to kill Stillwell; and Jerky was the kind who kills to save a friend. It was possible that Uncle Hoddy had done the shooting, and that Jerky had confessed to a lie to save him.

Hashknife considered all these things as possibilities. But there were things he could not believe. He was also puzzled over the fact that Bradley & Jones had wired him to cancel that shipment, ordered him back to Seattle, and then had gone ahead and purchased by wire from Renton.

If Smoky's letter to Bradley & Jones had caused them to take their former buyer off that territory, they must certainly know that Renton was guilty of bribing that buyer to handle only Flying V cattle. If so, why did they call off their buyer and do business with the Flying V by wire?

It was possible, but to Hashknife it was inconsistent. Shorty had wired from Tucson that he had confirmed Bradley's wire; so there was nothing further for Hashknife to do. He still had the telegrams from Bradley and the one from Shorty. By this time Shorty would be travelling up the coast, heading for Seattle.

"Anyway, I done what I could for him," said Hashknife, as he and Sleepy sat in the office of the Rincon Hotel.

"You thinkin' out loud?" asked Sleepy, looking up from an old newspaper.

"Yeah." Hashknife smiled. "I was thinkin' about Shorty Woods."

"I hope he don't lose his job."

"Prob'ly won't. They wouldn't ship him back to Seattle to fire him."

"Renton's pretty slick, Hashknife. He must have had it all framed, 'cause they moved our cars right over to Washout. I shore don't think much of that feller Bradley. But mebbe Renton lied to him about how things are here. It's business, I reckon, but it don't smell good."

After that things went along quietly for several days. Hashknife and Sleepy were still riding Tumbling H horses, and Uncle Hoddy begged them to keep the animals as long as they stayed in the Rincon country. They did not tell the old man about the Flying V making that shipment.

"My aunt will arrive this evening," said Marion, as she talked with Hashknife on the front porch.

"You'd like her. She's pretty and not so old. Her name is Jane Allen."

"That's fine." Hashknife smiled. "Will she want to take you back with her?"

"I suppose she will. Aunt Jane is a wonderful woman. She has money, but no one ever knew it. She lives simply."

"Never got married, eh?"

"No. But I think she has a sweetheart."

"That would be my luck." Hashknife laughed.

"I know you will like her; every one does."

"That's the way to be—liked by every one. Do you like it out here in Arizona?"

"Under different circumstances, I believe I would love it. Aunt Abbey has been so wonderful to me. My own mother couldn't have been sweeter. And we are all so glad that Uncle Hoddy is out of jail. He couldn't have done a thing like that."

"What do they think of Jerky Gillis?"

"They don't know what to think."

"It is kinda hard to figure out. Did you say your aunt is comin' in to-night?"

"On the seven o'clock train. We are all going to the depot, and I want you to come and meet her."

"I'll try and be there, Miss Stillwell."

Hashknife started down the steps, but stopped.

"Miss Stillwell, does your aunt—I mean, did your aunt know this La Rue person?"

"Oh, yes, she knew him quite well."

"Thank you very much. You got a wire from her, did you?"

"Yes, I did. It was rather funny. Smoky had to go over to Washout and he sent the wire from there. Naturally the wire—that is, the reply, came to Washout, instead of Rincon, and a cowboy brought it over from there. It was nice of him to do that."

"It shore was. Was it ever proved that your father didn't get any of that money that was missin'?"

"He never was legally exonerated, Mr. Hartley."

"Thank you, Miss Stillwell."

Hashknife and Sleepy were at the depot that evening when the train arrived. The meeting between Marion and her aunt was very affectionate. Jane Allen was all that Marion had claimed. She was tall, slender, very handsome in severe black. After she had met the others Marion called Hashknife and Sleepy over.

"Aunt Jane, I want you to meet Hashknife Hartley," she said.

"Hashknife Hartley?" queried Miss Allen quickly.

"Yes, ma'am." The tall cowboy smiled.

"Why, that's funny! Weren't you to meet Shorty Woods at a place called Washout?"

"Shorty Woods?" It was Hashknife's turn to be surprised. "Didja say Shorty Woods, Miss Allen?"

"Why, yes. It was rather a coincidence. I knew he had been sent down in this territory by his firm, but I never expected to see him getting on my train at Tucson, walking on crutches. It seems——"

"Wait a minute!" begged Hashknife. "You say he was to meet me?"

"That was how I recognised your name. He said you were his very best friend and——"

"Is there anything wrong?" asked Smoky.

"Somethin' is all wrong," replied Hashknife.

"Shorty said you wired him," said Miss Allen.

"Is the sheriff around here?" asked the depot agent. "I've got an important telegram for him, and I can't leave."

"I'll take it to him," offered Smoky.

Hashknife and Sleepy backed away and hurried after Smoky, who beat them to the office. The sheriff stepped out as they reached the door.

"A man was shot in Washout a few minutes ago," he said. "Do you want to ride over there with me?"

"What is his name?" asked Hashknife.

"The telegram don't say. Goin' along?"

"Try and stop us!" grunted Hashknife.

They were riding out of Rincon as the people from the Tumbling H were coming down from the depot.

Washout consisted of a depot, watertank, one store and one saloon. The store was also the post office. Just away from the depot was a well-built loading corral. The three men had covered the five miles in record time, and went straight to the depot, where the anxious agent met them.

He had not touched the body, he said, nor had he told any one. He said he was upstairs, cooking his supper, when the train stopped. He explained that it was seldom that the train dropped a passenger at Washout. He said he came downstairs just in time to see a man going around the corner of the depot. The train was pulling out and there was considerable noise, but he distinctly heard a shot. Shots were not uncommon in Washout, as celebrating cowboys often blazed away at the moon. But something caused him to go out and look around, and there on the platform he found the man.

"And he was a cripple—walking on crutches," said the agent.

"Gawd, I was afraid you'd say that!" exclaimed Hashknife.

The agent took a lantern and led the way around the dark corner, where he stopped and held up the light.

"He's gone!" exclaimed the agent. "Right here is where he was."

There was no sign of the dead man. Hashknife took the lantern and examined the planking, but there was not even a spot of blood.

"Wasn't you dreamin'?" asked the sheriff.

"I swear I wasn't, Sheriff. I tell you, he was right here, flat on his back."

They took the lantern and looked all around, but nothing was to be found.

"Let's go down to the saloon," suggested Sleepy.

"Might as well look the place all over," agreed the sheriff.

They found four men playing poker, and in a chair, holding a wet towel to the back of his own head, was Shorty Woods. He grinned at Hashknife and Sleepy, who stopped short in the doorway.

"Well, you showed up all right, I see," said Shorty. "What kind of folks do you have in Arizona country? They shoot me in the legs in Tucson, and up here—look at that, will you?"

Shorty picked up his left crutch and held it out for their inspection. A bullet had smashed the thing about six inches below the shoulder brace.

"For gosh sake, what happened to you, anyway, Shorty?" asked Hashknife.

"Well, I don't know exactly, Hashknife. I got your wire to meet you here; so I got off the train and came humpety-hump around the corner, startin' down towards these lights, when all at once a man was in front of me, and a six-shooter blazed right against me.

"My leg ain't so awful good, you know, and it felt as though somebody yanked my crutch away from me, and down I went. The only thing I can figure out is that I hit the back of my head on one of them warped planks, and it knocked me cold.

"I don't know how long I was knocked out, but I woke up and managed to hobble down here, where the folks swabbed me off and gave me a wet towel. Oh, I'm all right now; the bleedin' has stopped."

"What about the telegram from you to meet you here, Hashknife?" asked the sheriff.

"That's all right," said Hashknife quickly. "I wonder if we can get a horse and saddle for Shorty."

"I'll get one from Turkey Edwards," said the sheriff. "How about it, Turkey? Got a horse and saddle we can rent?"

Edwards, the long, gaunt owner of the store, stopped shuffling the cards long enough to say:

"You can't rent nothin' from me, Raney—but you can have one free. You know where my stable is; so help yourself. Hope you won't suffer none from that bump, stranger."

"Thank you." Shorty smiled. "I'm all right now, and I'll buy everybody a drink before we pull out."

But before they left Washout, Hashknife went back to the depot to tell the agent they had found the dead man and that he was very much alive. Then he filed a long telegram to Bradley & Jones.

"Can you get that out to-night?" he asked the agent.

"I'll send it right now."

"I'll be over here to-morrow to get the answer, if there is one," said Hashknife.

"That's fine; and I'm glad the man wasn't killed. It sure scared me."

"Scared me, too. Hashknife grinned.

The agent was pounding out the telegram as he walked out to his horse.

Hashknife didn't want to discuss things in front of the sheriff; so there was little said on the way

back to Rincon, where they found Smoky Hill waiting for them.

"Miss Allen was so worried about things that I came in to see what happened over at Washout," explained Smoky. "I had to tell her that a man got shot, and she was afraid it was you, Mr. Woods. I'll bet they're all sitting up out there, waiting for me to come back."

"Shorty, why don'tcha ride out there with Smoky," said Hashknife.

"Gosh, I dunno," faltered Shorty. "I look like a mess."

"Oh, you look all right," said Smoky. "I wish you'd come. We've got plenty of room. How did you hurt your head?"

"Oh, I just wanted to see if it would bounce," Shorty laughed.

"Did it?"

"Bounced plumb up among the stars. Hashknife, do you think it would be all right if I went out there?"

"You're half-way out there already," said Hashknife. "Go on out there and talk with your girl."

"Will you come out to-morrow morning? Me and you have got to have a talk."

"I'll be out. *Vamose*, both of you—I'm sleepy."

"Well," said Sleepy, when they were back in their room, "what do you think of that deal?"

Hashknife laughed softly.

"I'm sure of one thing, pardner; Shorty Woods wasn't shot by accident in Tucson. That jigger shore bears a charmed life, or somebody around Arizona is a poor shot."

"Ain't there anythin' I can do to help you find him?"

"Do you really want to help me find him, Sleepy?"

"I shore do."

"All right. To-morrow you start lookin' for a man who shoots a sawed-off .44."

"A sawed-off .44?"

"With a barrel not more than an inch long."

"Huh!" snorted Sleepy foolishly. "It won't be a cowpuncher."

"I'm just wonderin' about that myself."

"And he's a poor shot," mused Sleepy.

"Well, don't ask for any personal tests." Hashknife grinned. "Even a poor shot will hit you if he shoots enough times."

Hashknife was up before daylight. Sleepy had his orders to ride out later to the Tumbling H and wait there, until Hashknife got back from Washout.

"You sure ride early, if you came from Rincon." The agent grinned as he handed Hashknife the telegram.

"The early bird catches the worm," said Hashknife.

"Ain't many worm hunters around here. How's the feller who got his crutch shot?"

"Oh, he's all right."

"It sure had me worried. That one shot—and him lyin' there, all stiffened out. I'd have sworn he was dead."

Hashknife read the telegram.

> SHORTY WOODS, WASHOUT, ARIZ.
> SPECIAL ORDER FILLED BY RENTON RINCON STOP WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN NO ANSWER TO ANY OF OUR TELEGRAMS STOP RENTON WIRES YOU NEVER CAME TO BUY AT RINCON STOP WE WOULD APPRECIATE LETTER IN DETAIL.—BRADLEY.

Hashknife put the telegram in his pocket and rode

back to Rincon, where he ate breakfast with Speck Magee. Frank Kemp came in to breakfast and sat down with them. Kemp wanted to know about the shooting at Washout, and Hashknife told him what had happened.

"So this was the *real* Shorty Woods, eh?" he said.

Hashknife watched him narrowly as he replied:

"Yeah, the real one, Kemp."

"I understand he's out at the Tumbling H."

"Yeah, he's out there. You'll prob'ly meet him."

The lawyer sipped his coffee thoughtfully.

"Jerky Gillis wants me to defend him," he said.

"He does? What do you think of it, Kemp?"

"I didn't give him any answer. Renton left yesterday for Tucson, and asked me to meet him in Phoenix. He said he'd wire me."

"What's Renton got to do with you defendin' Jerky?"

"Renton pays me a retaining fee—call it a monthly salary, if you wish—to handle his business exclusively. There would be no money in it for me to defend Jerky Gillis, and I'd be a fool to do it against Renton's wishes."

"Yeah, that's true, Kemp; a feller must look out for himself. How soon will Renton be back here?"

"He didn't say."

Hashknife rode out to the Tumbling H alone. He found Sleepy and Smoky perched on the corral fence in a shady spot.

"How's ever'body this mornin'?" asked Hashknife.

"Meet Mister Indigo Blue," said Sleepy, pointing at Smoky.

"Aw, gee!" blurted Smoky defensively. "I'm

not blue. Marion's aunt is going to ship the body back to Seattle——"

"Tell him the rest of it," urged Sleepy.

"And Marion is goin' along, eh?" asked Hashknife.

"To-morrow," said Smoky dolefully. "And they aren't coming back. Miss Allen and Shorty are going to get married as soon as everything is settled, and she has money enough to put them in business. She says cattle buying is too dangerous."

"Yeah, when they start shootin' cripples, it's dangerous. Smoky, will you go up to the house and tell Miss Allen that I'd like to have her come out on the front porch where I can talk privately to her?"

"You bet I will, Hashknife," replied Smoky, and hurried up to the house.

"What have you got to talk privately about?" asked Sleepy.

"I want to warn her about some of Shorty's bad points," Hashknife said seriously.

Jane Allen was perfectly willing to talk with Hashknife, and Smoky came back to sit on the fence with Sleepy.

"That's my idea of a mighty pretty woman," said Sleepy.

"She is wonderful," agreed Smoky. "You should find a woman like her, Sleepy."

"Find 'em and lose 'em," sighed the stocky cowpuncher.

"You've never had any luck with women?"

"Luck? I dunno, Smoky; you see, I've never been married."

"Neither have I," said Smoky, smiling wistfully.

"You? Hell, you ain't dry behind the ears yet." Sleepy laughed. "You'll have lots of girls, feller. Look 'em over careful before you pick one for life." And Sleepy sang softly:

"Could you be true
To eyes of blue
If you looked into eyes of grey?"

"I could," said Smoky.

"You've got the makin' of a good cowpuncher, Smoky."

"Do you think I have?"

"Sure have; you can lie like one already. I wonder if that lanky pardner of mine is goin' to talk all day to that pretty woman."

"What is his right name, Sleepy?"

"His name is Hennery," said Sleepy. "But don't call him that."

"You haven't always been Sleepy, have you?"

"No-o-o, I jist got thataway from bein' up late at night. Well, I reckon the private conference is about over up there. Yeah, the tall feller is shakin' her hand. They must have agreed on somethin'."

Hashknife strolled down to the corral, a satisfied expression on his long, lean face.

"How do you like Miss Allen?" asked Smoky.

"She's got a lot of horse sense."

"And plenty good looks," added Sleepy.

"I didn't notice that."

"You see, Smoky!" exclaimed Sleepy. "When you can wear high heels on your boots, a chin strap on your hat, pack an old Colt on your hip and lie like that, you'll be a tophand cowpuncher."

"I guess there is hope for me." Smoky laughed.

"Plenty." Hashknife smiled. "Son, Miss Allen will ask you to do somethin' for her, and you do it. Don't ask any questions and don't tell anybody."

"All right, Hashknife; anything she says."

That afternoon all the people came in from the Tumbling H, and while Aunt Abbey and Uncle

Hoddy visited Jerky Gillis, Miss Allen made all the arrangements to ship her brother's body to Seattle on the evening train. She bought tickets for Marion, Shorty Woods and herself, which was big business for the Rincon depot agent.

Steve Taylor, Renton's foreman, was in town, and Hashknife asked him if he knew how to get in touch with Renton.

"He's in Tucson now," replied Steve. "Ought to be back pretty soon. He said he'd be at the Ranger Hotel if we wanted him, and for us to wire him there."

"You don't know where Kemp is, do you, Taylor?"

"He's out at the ranch, drunk as a fool. Every time he slops over, he comes out there. Says it ain't dignified to get drunk in town."

"When did he come out there—this mornin'?"

"No, he came out last night about eight o'clock."

Hashknife met Uncle Hoddy on the street and told him that Renton was at the Ranger Hotel in Tucson.

"Will you write that telegram you spoke about, Hashknife? I don't know jist how to word it."

They went into the Rincon Hotel and Hashknife wrote:

> IN ORDER TO SATISFY MORTGAGE I MUST SELL TUMBLING H AT ONCE AND WILL GIVE YOU FIRST CHANCE STOP SEE ME AT ONCE—HODDY HILL.

"That's about it," said Hashknife. "Send it as quick as you can."

"I'll go right to the depot," said Uncle Hoddy. Hashknife smiled as he watched the old man bow-legging his way up the street.

"There's one nice thing about the oldtimers—they don't ask questions," said Hashknife.

"It wouldn't do 'em a bit of good to ask you things," replied Sleepy. "You won't even tell me what you've got on your mind. I just foller you around like Mary's little lamb."

"You're a great pardner, Sleepy."

"Yeah—silent pardner."

They were all at the depot that night to see the party leave for Seattle. That is, they were all there except Smoky, and no one even inquired for him.

Hashknife and Sleepy spent the next day in loafing around the town. Speck Magee and Sleepy played pool until both of them were tired out from walking around the table. Kemp, slightly bleary, came in from the Flying V. He was sober, but not in a pleasant frame of mind.

"Hoddy Hill sent Renton a wire yesterday," said Hashknife.

"What for?" asked Kemp.

"Well, Hoddy feels that he's got to sell the Tumblin' H. Even if that mortgage is missin' and never was recorded, Hoddy feels that it is a moral obligation. So he's offerin' Renton the first chance to buy him out."

"Renton wants it," said Kemp. "That is, he did want it. He may have changed his mind by this time."

"Have you heard from him?"

"Not a word."

CHAPTER VII

SAM FISHER, depot agent at Rincon, was a grouchy individual. Being a depot agent in a small town meant that he must be capable of acting as telegraph operator, express clerk, baggage and freight clerk. In fact, he did all there was to do, and wailed over the small salary received.

Sam usually closed his office at nine o'clock in the evening, went around to see that all doors were locked from the inside, kicked out the office cat and then went upstairs to his one-room apartment where he would stick his long nose into a paper-back novel.

This night Sam followed his regular routine. He remembered that the big sliding door of the baggage room was open ; so he took a lantern, went through the connecting door to his office, and was crossing the floor to the big doorway when a man arose from behind a packing case and shoved a gun into Sam's ribs.

" Close the door," ordered the man. " And if you let out one yip, Saint Peter will hear it."

Sam closed the door and looked for the next order.

" Set down on the floor against that box and rest your feet."

Sam was not exactly timid, but he was cautious. The man wore a black mask, which covered his head and neck, and Sam noticed that the muzzle of the big Colt did not waver at all.

" I ain't got a cent," declared Sam.

" You ain't tryin' to borrow any from me, are you ? " asked the man.

"No," said Sam, "I ain't. You ain't goin' to stick up a train, are you?"

"That's an idea." The masked man chuckled. "I never thought of that."

Fifteen minutes passed, and Sam began to get nervous.

"How long are you goin' to keep me here?" asked Sam.

"Gettin' paid for it, ain't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"The railroad pays you a salary, don't they? Keep your mouth shut about this, and they'll never know you was off the job."

"Oh——" said Sam.

It was fully thirty minutes from the time Sam was made captive before the masked man made any move. From somewhere came a soft whistle. The man motioned Sam to his feet.

"Open that door, and after I'm out, lock it. One crooked move and I'll drill you full of holes—understand?"

"Y-y-yes, sir," stammered Sam.

Sam did not see the man who had whistled the signal. In fact, Sam did not look around much. He went back to his office, lighted the lamp and searched the place. The little safe, which only held a few dollars, was intact, the ticket drawer untouched. Apparently not a thing had been taken.

The masked man had not warned him to keep all this a secret; so after a careful examination he went down to the sheriff's office, where he found the sheriff and Hashknife. Just a bit out of breath, he told his story to them.

"You ain't been drinkin' nor dreamin', have you, Sam?" asked the sheriff.

Sam denied this indignantly.

They went to the depot with Sam, who took them

to the baggage room and explained what had happened.

"Sounds crazy to me," declared the sheriff. "There wouldn't be any sense in it, Sam. Nothin' gone, nothin' touched."

After looking around the place, Hashknife and the sheriff went back to the office.

"The railroad company better send a man out to replace Sam," said the sheriff. "That jigger is goin' crazy."

"Yeah, I'll bet he is," agreed Hashknife.

That night, long after Sleepy was in bed and snoring, Hashknife sat at the window of his room, watching the deserted street. At midnight a passenger train stopped at the depot, and a few minutes later a solitary figure came down the street. Hashknife watched the man walk into the Double Eagle Saloon, then he went over to the bed and began undressing. Sleepy blinked up at him.

"Bob Renton jist got back from Tucson," said Hashknife.

"What am I supposed to do—give three cheers?" asked Sleepy drowsily.

Hashknife laughed softly and pulled off his boots.

At ten o'clock the next morning Bob Renton rode into Rincon. He found Frank Kemp at his office, and after a short conversation they went to the livery stable, where Kemp rented a saddle-horse. Sleepy was watching them from the Double Eagle Saloon, and as soon as they rode out of town he went to the hitch-rack, where he untied his horse and an extra one. Then he rode towards the depot.

Uncle Hoddy Hill was sitting in an easy chair on his porch when Renton and his lawyer arrived. Kemp shook hands with the old man, but Renton merely nodded and said:

"I got your telegram, Hill. You say you've got

to sell this ranch to satisfy that mortgage. All right, what's your price ?"

"I've been tryin' to figure that out," replied Uncle Hoddy. "It's worth more than it was when you wanted to buy it, because there's more cattle. You see, I haven't been able to sell any. Let's go inside and talk this over."

Kemp and Uncle Hoddy sat down, but Renton moved restlessly about.

"I won't pay more than I offered you," said Renton. "I don't want the place as much as I did."

"That's up to you, Renton," replied Uncle Hoddy. "I'm givin' you first chance."

"Why wouldn't this be a good scheme ?" suggested the lawyer. "If you can figure out a price on the ranch itself, we can round up the cattle and make a count."

"Do you think I'm goin' to pay a market price ?" asked Renton. "If I can't take this place at a bargain, I won't touch it. And I'll bet he'll have a hell of a time getting a better price. Let him show what his income has been for the past two years." Renton laughed harshly. "Let him show anybody what this place pays."

"I can easily show *why* it didn't pay, Renton."

"Oh, can you ? Well, go ahead. You know what sort of terms I'll do business on. Kemp knows. Go ahead and name a price. I've got you where the hair is short, Hill. I've often said I'd make you sell out at my price."

Renton walked across the room and looked through the window. He could see the road to Rincon. Two riders were coming towards the house. Renton scowled, looked closer. It was Sleepy and Sam Fisher, the depot agent. Renton turned quickly and started for the open door, but stopped short.

Just inside the doorway stood Hashknife Hartley, his level grey eyes fixed on Renton. Then Hashknife spoke sharply:

"Which one is it, Shorty?"

"You've got him in front of you!" snapped Shorty's voice, and Renton swung around to see Shorty Woods leaning against the doorway to the dining-room, braced against one crutch.

"Hello, La Rue," he said. "Long time I no see you, feller."

Renton's face had gone white, eyes narrowed, his mouth merely a line.

"They didn't go far night before last, Renton," said Hashknife. "They bought tickets to Seattle, but got off at Washout. Just a little trick o' mine, Renton, to see if you wouldn't show yourself after they left. It was easy to figure you was keepin' out o' sight o' Shorty and Jane Allen, La Rue. Take his gun, Hoddy. He's a lobo, but he's trapped now."

Hoddy got the gun and walked back to the table.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Kemp, as Hashknife stepped over and searched him quickly for concealed weapons.

"No guns, eh?" Hashknife grinned.

"Why would I carry a gun?"

For a moment all eyes were off Renton, and quick as a flash he drew a short gun from under his left armpit.

"Trapped, am I?" he cried. "Make a move, any of you. Back away from that door, Hartley! I'll kill anybody who makes a move. Drop that gun of mine on the floor, Hill."

Hoddy tossed him the gun, and he cautiously picked it up.

"Throw your gun through the doorway, Hartley," he ordered.

Hashknife tossed the gun out on the porch.

" I'm going out and get on my horse," said Renton evenly, " and I'll kill the man who tries to stop me."

He stepped slowly over to the doorway, backed out, keeping his gun covering the group in the house, and backed right into the arms of Sleepy. Renton had apparently forgotten the short cowboy was out there.

Renton fought like a tiger, but Sleepy knew how to handle him, and when he pitched him back into the room, all the fight was out of him. Hashknife recovered the short gun and held it out to the sheriff.

" This is the gun that killed Stillwell," he said.

" Do you reckon it's safe for the folks to come in ? " asked Uncle Hoddy. " I know they're mighty nervous out there in that bedroom."

Renton sat on the floor, nursing a wrenched arm. Jane Allen looked at him and nodded quickly.

" Why, of course, it is Albert La Rue," she said.

" Anythin' you'd like to say, La Rue ? " asked Hashknife.

" You can't prove anything against me," the man declared. " Mark Stillwell served his time for that job ; you can't convict me of anything. If I want to change my name, that's my business."

" I was kinda stuck for a while," admitted Hashknife. " The man who killed Mark Stillwell shot a short gun. The bullet don't show any marks of lands in the bore, and it didn't penetrate like it should. Renton wore a belt gun, and I never thought about him wearin' another. In fact, I almost suspected Mr. Kemp."

" Go ahead and see how much a jury will think of your ideas," gritted Renton.

" Never mind the jury," said Hashknife, " although maybe a jury would be interested in those shots you took at Shorty — and in a few other

things." Hashknife then turned to Sleepy and said, "Bring Sam Fisher in."

Sam Fisher came in, frightened badly.

"There's your pardner, Sam," said Hashknife. "Do you want to go to jail with him?"

"What in the world did Sam have to do with it?" asked Kemp.

"Sam was the boy who held up and faked telegrams for Mr. La Rue. Remember the hold-up at the depot last night? Well, me and Sleepy pulled that job. While Sleepy entertained Sammy, I searched the flimsy book. In case you don't know what that is, it's the book in which they record telegrams. It helps the auditor check up things. And those telegrams wasn't recorded. When I sent a wire, Sammy held it for Renton, and Renton told him what the answer was to be."

"How in the world did you ever think of that?" asked Shorty.

"Oh, I used a little bait, Shorty. La Rue, do you remember the wire I sent to Jack Kinnear at St. Louis? And do you remember the reply from Jack Kinnear? Do you? Fine. I don't mind tellin' you that Kinnear's name is Oscar and that his packin' house is in Kansas City—not St. Louis. Even a lobo wolf can be caught, if you offer the right bait."

La Rue said nothing. Hashknife turned to Sam Fisher.

"Am I right, Sam?"

"You are," said Sam huskily. "I'll tell all I know."

"That's fine, Sam. Where was La Rue when he was supposed to be in Tucson?"

"Living upstairs over the depot with me."

"And you gave him Hoddy Hill's telegram?"

"Yes." Sam nodded miserably.

"Where's that mortgage, La Rue?"

"I burned it, damn you!"

"And that"—Hashknife smiled—"is an admission of murder."

Quickly the sheriff handcuffed both La Rue and Sam Fisher. Kemp leaned against the wall, grave of face. Finally he looked at Hashknife and smiled.

"It looks as though I wouldn't get a chance to defend Jerky."

"You might try your hand on La Rue."

"No, I don't think he will require much legal advice. You know, I told him that the sheriff said you were the cleverest detective in the Western ranges, and he thought Raney was covering too much territory."

"He ain't a detective—he's a trapper." Sleepy laughed.

"Here's a job for you, Kemp," said Hashknife. "See if you can't get the law to give La Rue's holdings to Marion. She's shore entitled to all he's got, if anybody is."

"I'll ask her about that right now, Hartley."

Hashknife and Sleepy went out where the sheriff, deputy and Smoky were putting La Rue and Sam Fisher on their horses.

"Want to go back with us and see Jerky walk out?" asked Speck.

"Shore." Hashknife smiled, and Sleepy went to get the horses.

Marion came out and took Hashknife by the sleeve.

"I'm not going back to Seattle," she said.

"You ain't? Well, that's fine, Marion."

"And that mortgage will never be collected. Mr. Kemp says he's sure the court will give me the Flying V."